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67. "Perley," Boston *Morning Journal,* 25 January 1860; "Videx," Sacramento *Union,* 25 February 1860; H. M. Phillips to Bigler, 23 January 1860, Bigler Papers.

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69. Andrew Adams to Joseph Lane, 14, 21 July 1860, Lane Papers; James E. Hendrickson, *Joe Lane of Oregon: Machine Politics and the Sectional Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 228; New York *Tribune,* 27 June 1860; Springfield *Republican* 30 June, 14 July, 11 August 1860.

70. Springfield *Republican,* 7, 14, 28 July, 4, 11 August 1860; New York *Tribune,* 27, 30 June 1860; Thomas L. Smith to Joseph Lane, 2 July 1860, C. N. Pine to Lane, 3 July 1860, Lane Papers; Springfield *Republican,* 14 July 1860.

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"No Bed of Roses": James Buchanan, Abraham Lincoln, and Presidential Leadership in the Civil War Era

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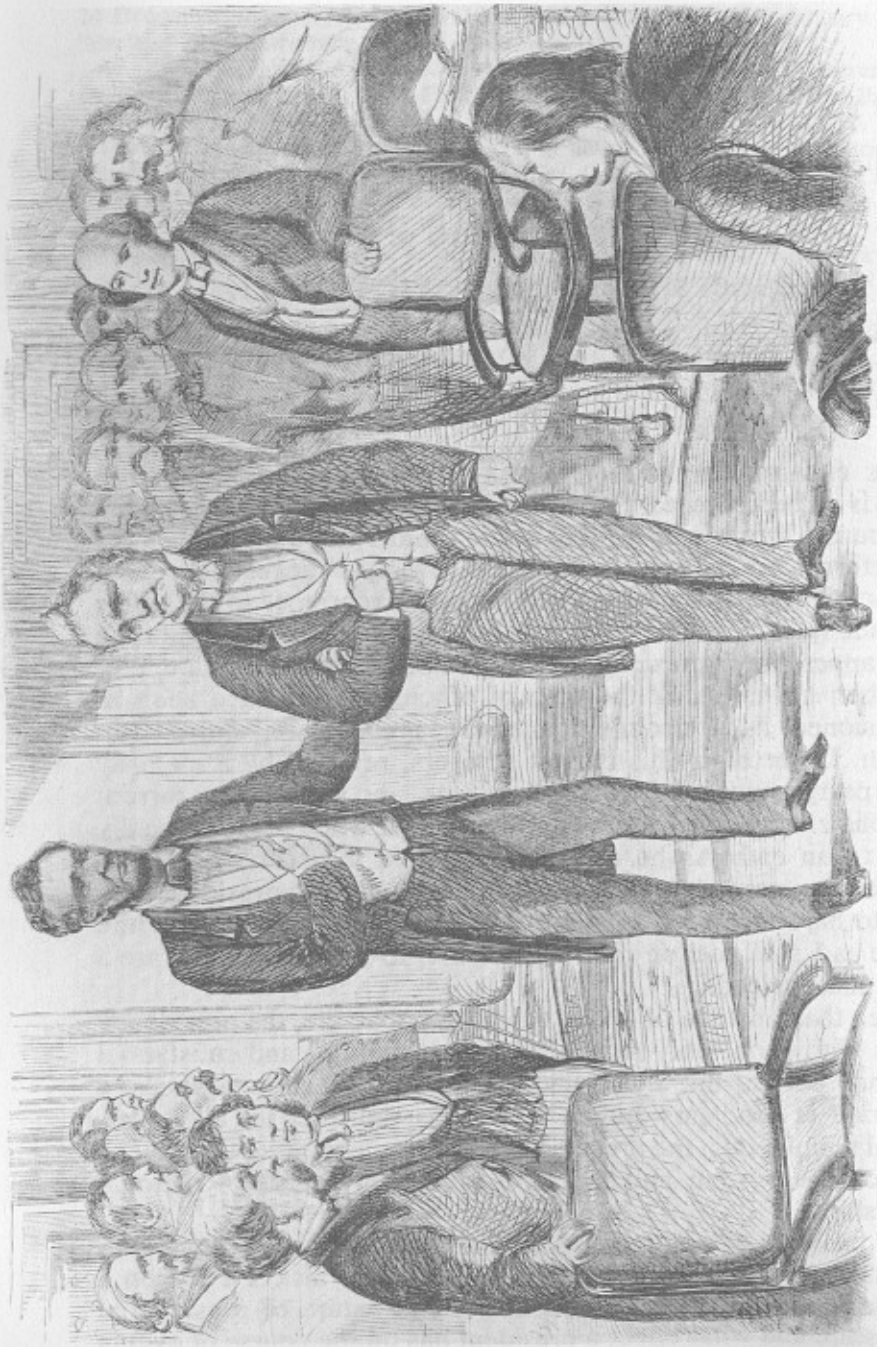
"THE PRESIDENCY, EVEN TO THE MOST EXPERIENCED POLITICIANS, is no bed of roses," Abraham Lincoln once observed, noting, "No human being can fill that station and escape censure."[1] He was referring to Zachary Taylor's controversy-wracked tenure, but his comment aptly foreshadowed his own experience in the office a decade later. It is safe to say that the position does not hold the same appeal for a president at the end of his administration as it did when he first took the oath of office, but few have been as disillusioned as Lincoln's immediate predecessor, James Buchanan. Deserted by his closest advisers, rejected by a majority of his party, repudiated by the electorate, and subject to a torrent of public ridicule, he felt an enormous relief when his term finally came to an end. As he rode with Lincoln in a carriage to the inauguration ceremony in March 1861, the outgoing president confided to his successor, "If you are as happy in entering the White House as I shall feel on returning [home] to Wheatland, you are a happy man indeed."[2]

Often the capstone of a long career in public life, the presidency brings with it not only significant responsibilities and substantial personal power, but even under the best of circumstances a multitude of problems and headaches as well. Yet for all its trials and tribulations, the presidency remains the focus of the American political system and the most important source of national leadership.

The problem of evaluating presidential leadership has long concerned historians and political scientists. What makes a person a successful president, what constitutes the nature of presidential leadership, and what effect a president has on the course of events are all critical questions. The main conclusion to be drawn from



PRESIDENTS BUCHANAN AND LINCOLN ENTERING THE SENATE CHAMBER BEFORE THE INAUGURATION.—[From a Sketch by our Special Artist.]

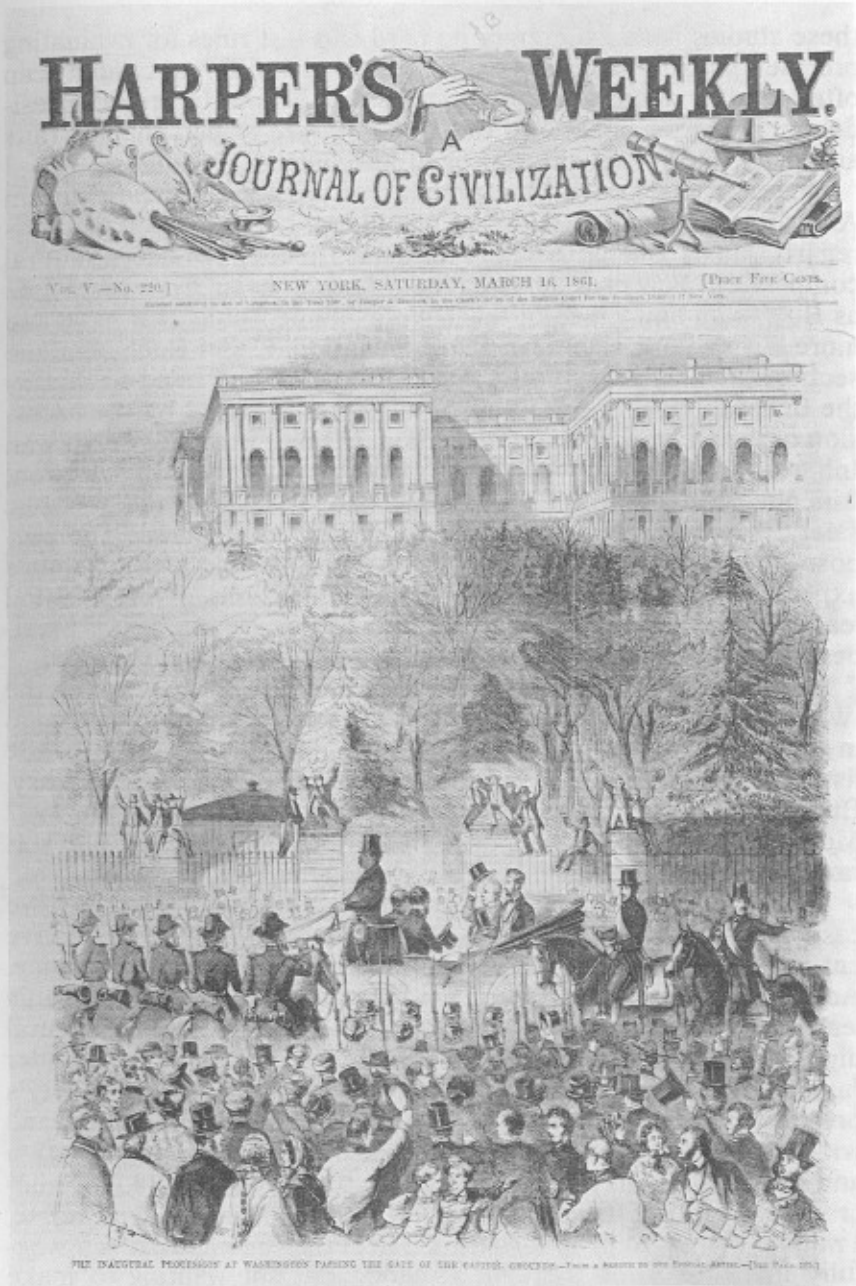
Leslie's Illustrated Magazine **depicts Buchanan's role as Lincoln's escort just prior to the inauguration of the sixteenth president of the United States. Courtesy of Dickinson College.**

these studies is that there are no hard and fast rules for evaluating presidential performance. Similar action in a different context can often lead to strikingly dissimilar results. Efforts to predict presidential performance, based on some mixture of personality traits and prior experience, have proved misguided and fruitless.

One way to approach the problem of presidential leadership in American history is to compare presidents of the same era. In this regard, James Buchanan and Abraham Lincoln provide a natural comparison. Few presidents have held power in such a critical time as Buchanan and Lincoln; few have made decisions that have had more far-reaching significance for the nation. Under Buchanan, the sectional conflict, long in the making, steadily worsened so that by the time he left office the Union had been sundered by the secession of the Deep South and the nation was on the brink of civil war. Inheriting this crisis, which had been precipitated by his election, Lincoln soon confronted the challenge of leading the republic safely through a costly civil war to preserve the Union. The purpose of such a comparison is not to extol Lincoln at Buchanan's expense, but instead to examine the dimensions of presidential leadership in the Civil War era and to probe the sources of presidential success and failure.

In evaluating presidential performance, historians have given the two men strikingly different grades. Lincoln invariably is included in the highest category, and most put him at the very top of the list, ranking him as the greatest president in American history. Buchanan, in contrast, has fared much more poorly. In the 1982 Murray-Blessing poll, the most extensive of these surveys, he was ranked a failure, with only Nixon, Grant, and Harding below him.[3]

Yet if prior experience was any guide, Buchanan should have easily outshone Lincoln as chief executive. Indeed, few men have entered the presidency after such long and varied public service. Active in public life for more than four decades, the Pennsylvania leader had been a member of both houses of Congress, held several diplomatic posts, served in the cabinet as secretary of state under James K. Polk, and had been a serious candidate for his party's presidential nomination for over a decade. Indeed, his long and wide-ranging experience, coupled with his reputation for caution and moderation, played a large role in gaining him the 1856 Democratic nomination. In 1852, the party had nominated a dark horse, Franklin Pierce, to head its national ticket. Pierce had proven woefully inadequate for the task at hand, and not wanting to make the same mistake again, the delegates in 1856 turned instead to Buchanan, a veteran party wheelhorse. Following Buchanan's victory in November, Democrats were confident that he would avoid


HARPER'S WEEKLY.
A JOURNAL OF CIVILIZATION.
VOL. V.—No. 220.] NEW YORK, SATURDAY, MARCH 16, 1861. [PRICE FIVE CENTS.

Harper's Weekly portrays the inaugural procession, 4 March 1861. Courtesy of Dickinson College.

Pierce's mistakes and successfully guide the party and the nation through the sectional crisis.[4] The normally astute Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, for one, predicted that with Buchanan's election "there will never be another sectional or slavery struggle in the United States, at least in our day."[5]

Abraham Lincoln, on the other hand, was one of the least experienced presidents in American history. He had served several terms in the Illinois legislature, but his entire federal experience was limited to one undistinguished term in the 1840s in the House of Representatives. Failing to obtain an appointive position in Illinois under Taylor, he had never held an executive office, and had been out of public office for more than a decade prior to his nomination for the presidency. He had made two unsuccessful attempts, in 1855 and again in 1858, to obtain a seat in the United States Senate. For a variety of reasons, however, the delegates at the 1860 Republican national convention believed that he was the strongest candidate they could run, and that none of the other leading contenders could be elected. Dismissing the possibility of secession, the delegates and party leaders gave little consideration to Lincoln's qualifications or his ability to lead the country. Republicans concluded that Lincoln had the best chance of winning and that was sufficient.[6]

Upon entering the presidency, Buchanan and Lincoln each faced one overriding challenge. For Buchanan, it was to dampen the sectional conflict, reassure Southerners, and check the growth of the suddenly robust Republican Party. In 1856 the antislavery Republican Party, which seemed close to death at the start of the year, had nearly triumphed in its first national campaign. John C. Frémont, the party's presidential candidate, had surprisingly run first in the North, carrying all the free states but five, and had nearly been elected. Moreover, despite his strength in the South, Buchanan was a minority president, as 55 percent of the voters had supported either Frémont or former president Millard Fillmore, the candidate of the American Party.[7] With the sectional Republican Party having come so close to winning, it was imperative that the new president defuse the controversy over the expansion of slavery. Buchanan needed to pursue policies that would retain the Democratic Party's regular supporters, prevent the Republicans from gaining a disproportionate share of new voters, and keep the Fillmore voters in the free states out of the Republican ranks. Large gains by the Republicans among new voters and former Know-Nothings would produce a Republican victory in 1860, and with it the likely disruption of the Union.

Nor was Buchanan blind to this political situation. On the contrary, he discerned precisely the challenge before him. Soon after his election, he declared that his goal as president would be "to arrest, if possible, the agitation of the slavery question at the North, and to destroy sectional parties. Should a kind Providence enable me to succeed in my efforts to restore harmony to the Union, I shall feel that I have not lived in vain."[8]

Assuming office four years later, Lincoln confronted a considerably more difficult problem: to preserve the Union. By the time he was inaugurated, seven Southern states—the entire Deep South—had seceded from the Union and established a rival government, the Confederate States of America. Unwilling to recognize the legality of secession, Lincoln tried to continue the existing stalemate over Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor, but his decision to send a relief expedition to the besieged federal garrison led instead to war. In response to the attack on Fort Sumter, Lincoln adopted the policy of using whatever military force was necessary to restore the Union. Like Confederate leaders, he initially anticipated that the war would be short and require only limited use of force, but by the time the conflict ended four years later, it had cost over 620,000 American lives and billions of dollars. Presiding over the government during the greatest crisis in the nation's history, a crisis entirely without precedent, Lincoln had to feel his way as he went, adopting means and altering policies as he thought best. Still, his fundamental goal remained to preserve the Union without destroying democracy in the process.

In setting up their respective administrations, Buchanan and Lincoln confronted the thorny problem of selecting a cabinet. Lincoln's cabinet was easily the more distinguished of the two, but Buchanan's cabinet was not a collection of nonentities. It contained two reasonably talented members, Howell Cobb in the Treasury Department and Jeremiah S. Black as attorney general, and if the other members were of no particular merit, only Secretary of War John Floyd was totally incompetent. Since Lincoln appointed all of his major rivals for the 1860 Republican nomination to his cabinet—probably in part so he could keep an eye on them—its members were considerably more prestigious. It had two outstanding members in Secretary of State William H. Seward and Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase; only Caleb B. Smith in the Interior Department was a nonentity. One member, the incompetent Secretary of War Simon Cameron, became enmeshed in charges of corruption and eventually departed. Thus Cameron balanced Floyd,

Buchanan and his cabinet, ca. 1857. From *Leslie's Illustrated Magazine*. Courtesy of Dickinson College.

and each was replaced by a far abler man, Joseph Holt in Buchanan's cabinet and Edwin Stanton under Lincoln.

A distinguished cabinet, however, is no guarantee of a successful presidency; a mediocre cabinet, as Andrew Jackson's presidency shows, does not inevitably preclude presidential achievement. While the two cabinets varied in ability, more critical was the relationship between each president and his department heads. The cabinet played a quite different role in the two administrations. Under Lincoln, the cabinet was never a policy-making body. From the beginning of his administration, Lincoln intended to be his own man and to rely on his cabinet more to administer policy than to determine it, especially with respect to the war. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles reported that cabinet meetings were "infrequent, irregular, and without system." Seward was frequently absent, preferring to deal with the president privately, and Secretary of War Stanton, fearing leaks, refused to discuss matters concerning the war in the presence of other members. The self-righteous Chase, convinced that his talents eclipsed all other members of the administration, including the president, was especially irritated by this state of affairs. "We . . . are called members of the Cabinet," he complained, "but are in reality only separate heads of depart-

ments, meeting now and then for talk on whatever happens to come uppermost, not for grave consultation on matters concerning the salvation of the country."[9]

Confident in his own ability to decide on the correct policy, Lincoln never felt bound by the prevailing opinion in the cabinet. In its first meeting, a majority of the cabinet voted to abandon Fort Sumter, yet Lincoln reserved judgment. On April Fool's Day, when Seward offered to be the premier of the administration and assume the burden of leadership, Lincoln tactfully but firmly rebuked his secretary's pretensions by affirming that *he* intended to fulfill that responsibility.[10] Critical decisions such as army commands and military strategy were not made by the cabinet. Nor was the decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, the most crucial decision Lincoln made in the entire war, a collective one. When he presented the subject to his cabinet on 22 July 1862, Lincoln prefaced the discussion by telling its members: "I have got you together to hear what I have written down. I do not wish your advice about the main matter—for that I have determined for myself. . . . If there is anything in the expressions I use, or in any other minor matter, which anyone of you thinks had best be changed, I shall be glad to receive the suggestions."[11]

With the exception of Chase, Lincoln remained on good personal terms with his cabinet members, but he relied on them as advisers only selectively. He sought their advice on matters germane to their department, and usually deferred to their judgment, but on other questions consulted them sporadically if at all. Welles confessed that "of the policy of the administration, if there be one, I am not advised beyond what is published and known to all." Chase fumed that if he wanted to know what was going on elsewhere in the administration, he had to send a clerk to get a copy of the New York *Herald*.[12] After his early misjudgment, Seward became a loyal supporter and Lincoln's most intimate official advisor. Jealous of Seward's influence, Welles grumbled that the secretary of state spent "a considerable portion of every day with the President, patronizing and instructing him, hearing and telling anecdotes, relating interesting details of occurrences in the Senate, and inculcating his political party notions."[13] Yet there was no doubt that with Seward, as the other members of the cabinet, Lincoln kept the upper hand and retained the final authority for himself.

In Buchanan's administration, in contrast, decision-making was a collaborative effort, achieved only after long discussion in the cabinet. Buchanan's style of administrative leadership was the search for consensus. This approach to decision-making meant that

the makeup of Buchanan's cabinet, which might have been adequate under different circumstances, was seriously flawed. First of all, the most important post—secretary of state—was occupied by Lewis Cass, who was never particularly dynamic in his best days, and who by now was seventy-five years old and verging on senility. Cass was selected primarily because he posed no threat to any ambitious party leader, either inside or outside the administration. Moreover, as an experienced diplomat Buchanan intended to take the lead in guiding foreign policy, which rendered Cass's role superfluous. In cabinet deliberations, however, the secretary of state, as the leading member, should have played a key role, both in forging a consensus and in steering the administration away from any disastrous decisions. Lethargic and mentally unalert, Cass failed to provide such direction or weigh in with any authority. Buchanan's initial choice for the post—Robert Walker, his colleague from the Polk cabinet—would have been a far superior choice. In particular, Walker, though from Mississippi, was a shrewd politician with national ambitions and would have served as a forceful counterbalance against the overweening Southern influence in the cabinet and among Buchanan's unofficial advisers. Cass played that role only once, when in a public relations ploy he suddenly resigned in December 1860 in protest over the administration's policy toward Fort Sumter—but by then Buchanan's presidency had been wrecked.

More disastrous still was the fact that Buchanan's cabinet represented only a narrow range of opinion within the Democratic Party. A bachelor who savored good food and could hold his liquor, Buchanan intended to make his department heads and their wives the center of his society. He viewed the cabinet as akin to a family, and thus, except for Cass, who was simply a figurehead, he appointed men with whom he felt personally comfortable. But the cabinet was excessively pro-Southern in its orientation, and its discussions were often dominated by Howell Cobb of Georgia and Jacob Thompson of Mississippi. Black, the most prominent member from the free states, tended to take a narrow, legalistic approach to problems and nurtured an intense hatred of abolitionism, which he simplistically identified with the Republican Party.[14]

Conspicuously absent from the cabinet was any supporter of Stephen A. Douglas. Harboring a strong personal dislike for the Illinois senator, Buchanan spitefully excluded him from the administration's counsels and did not consult with him to any great extent concerning the distribution of patronage, even in his own state. The most popular Democrat in the country and the odds-on favor-

ite to be the party's presidential nominee in 1860, Douglas was simply too important and too popular to be ignored. Moreover, as the most important Northern Democrat, he represented precisely that wing of the party that had to be placated and sustained if the Republican challenge was to be beaten back. If Democratic strength in the North eroded any further, the Republicans would control all the free states and be able to elect a president without any support in the South. It was imperative that Northern Democrats have a voice in the administration, yet they were effectively shut out.[15] Isaac Toucey lacked any weight, Cass was in his dotage, and Black was out of touch with Northern public opinion on the slavery issue.

The pro-Southern orientation of Buchanan's administration was reinforced by his unofficial advisers. Along with Cobb, Senator John Slidell of Louisiana, Senator Jesse Bright of Indiana, and Governor Henry Wise of Virginia were Buchanan's closest friends. They declined to join the administration but continued to give the president advice. None was particularly useful in this regard. Despite his New York origins, Slidell was an ardent proslavery sectionalist, Wise was erratic and impulsive, and Bright was a petty and vindictive political hack who was only nominally a free-state man. His sympathies lay with the South (he owned a plantation and slaves in Kentucky), and he was consumed with jealousy of Douglas, whom he considered his rival for leadership of the party in the Northwest. The thought that Bright could supplant Douglas as the favorite of the western Democrats was laughable. Indeed, it did not take an astute political observer to recognize that Bright's power had sharply declined in Indiana because of his proslavery views, and that he would be fortunate to retain control of his state, let alone the Northwest. During the war, he was expelled from the Senate for disloyalty, but by then his political power had been broken. Of one mind, Buchanan's advisers gave him similar advice until the secession crisis, and with his desire for harmony and consensus always uppermost, he lacked the independence of mind to disregard their advice.

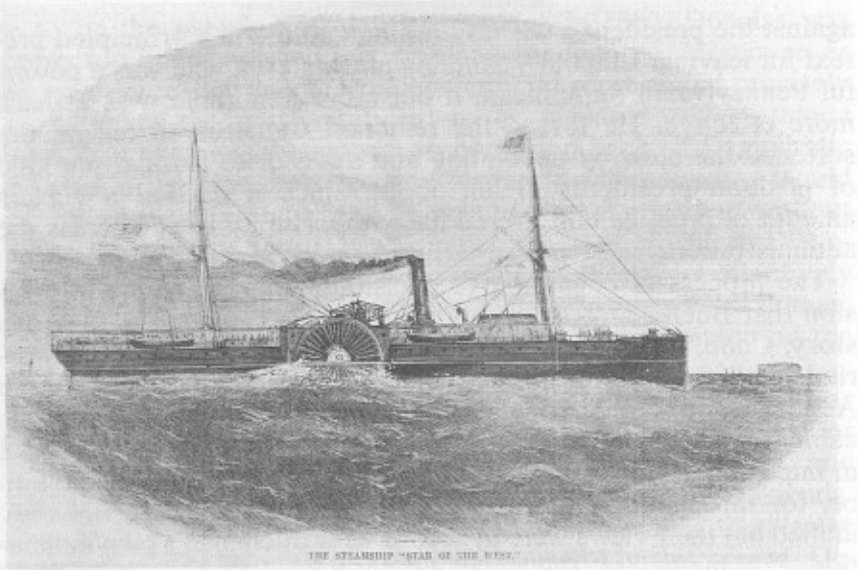
In contrast to Lincoln's dominance, Buchanan's role in his administration was much more circumspect. In this regard, the cases of John Floyd and Simon Cameron provide an instructive comparison. Evidence of mismanagement, favoritism, and corruption came to light during each man's tenure in the War Department. Realizing that Floyd's actions had further discredited the administration, Buchanan wanted him to resign but shrank from insisting on it when the secretary refused. Floyd remained in the cabinet

against the president's wishes until he could find a principled pretext for leaving. Lincoln's handling of Cameron, who was a powerful Pennsylvania Republican, if not more honorable, was at least more effective. He forced the reluctant Cameron to resign, but softened the blow by appointing him minister to Russia, the kind of position presidents dream about, since it carried a certain amount of prestige but offered little opportunity to embarrass the administration.

The process of collaborative decision-making gave the impression that Buchanan was simply a tool of his cabinet. In a famous story, Cobb, when once asked by a friend why he appeared worried, replied: "Oh, it's nothing much; only Buck is opposing the Administration."[16] The idea that Buchanan was controlled by his cabinet is a stereotype. True, Buchanan was not especially forceful in imposing his ideas on his administration, but he did not have to be, for throughout most of the term his advisors were not only unified but their views were in accord with Buchanan's own inclinations.[17] Nonetheless, Buchanan did not take a strong lead in establishing policy, he shut himself off from dissenting points of view, including those within his own party, and he was remarkably stubborn in adhering to policies even after their disastrous consequences had been demonstrated.

The harmony of Buchanan's cabinet collapsed in the secession crisis. The president's advisers were bitterly divided between secessionists, headed by Cobb and Thompson, and Unionists, led by Black. Caught between these two groups, Buchanan vacillated, although from the outset he consistently refused to recognize the legality of secession. The deep divisions among Buchanan's counselors eventually led to the breakup and reorganization of the cabinet. Cobb was the first member to leave; he was soon followed by Thompson and Floyd. Buchanan was particularly shaken by Cobb's departure, since he was especially fond of the jovial Georgian. Harkening back to the ideas of an earlier era, Buchanan viewed politics in terms of personal allegiances, and thus he felt personally betrayed by the resignation of the Southern members of the cabinet. When Black also threatened to resign unless the president adopt a stronger Unionist position concerning secession, Buchanan abjectly capitulated and allowed Black to rewrite his reply to the South Carolina commissioners. "I cannot part with you," the distraught president told Black, who now emerged as the dominant personality in the cabinet. For the remainder of his term Buchanan was no longer in effective control of his administration.[18]

In all of these areas, Lincoln provided a more impressive exam-



Contemporary portrait of the steamship *Star of the West*, an unarmed merchant vessel dispatched to Fort Sumter on 5 January 1861, providing reinforcements and provisions for Major Robert Anderson's beleaguered force in Charleston harbor. On 9 January the ship was repulsed with cannon fire from South Carolina shore batteries and returned to New York. From *Leslie's Illustrated Magazine*. Courtesy of Dickinson College.

ple of presidential leadership. Lacking an inner circle of advisers and political cronies, he exposed himself to a wide range of opinion, took the lead in establishing policies on matters that he considered presidential responsibility, delegated authority effectively to subordinates, and displayed remarkable flexibility on questions of policy. His cabinet represented all the major factions in the party and contained the full spectrum of Republican opinion, from the radical Salmon P. Chase to the ultraconservative Gideon Welles. Nor did Lincoln allow personal feelings to determine his decisions. Lincoln was "a very poor hater," a longtime Illinois associate remarked, and he was always ready to work with anyone who agreed with him on a particular issue, whatever their other differences, including men he did not like personally.[19] He kept Chase in the cabinet until 1864, despite their increasingly icy relations, because of the secretary's valuable service to the Union. His philosophy was well summarized by his advice in the 1850s to Whigs who resisted joining with abolitionists in opposing the Kansas-Nebraska Act: "Stand with anybody that stands RIGHT. Stand with him

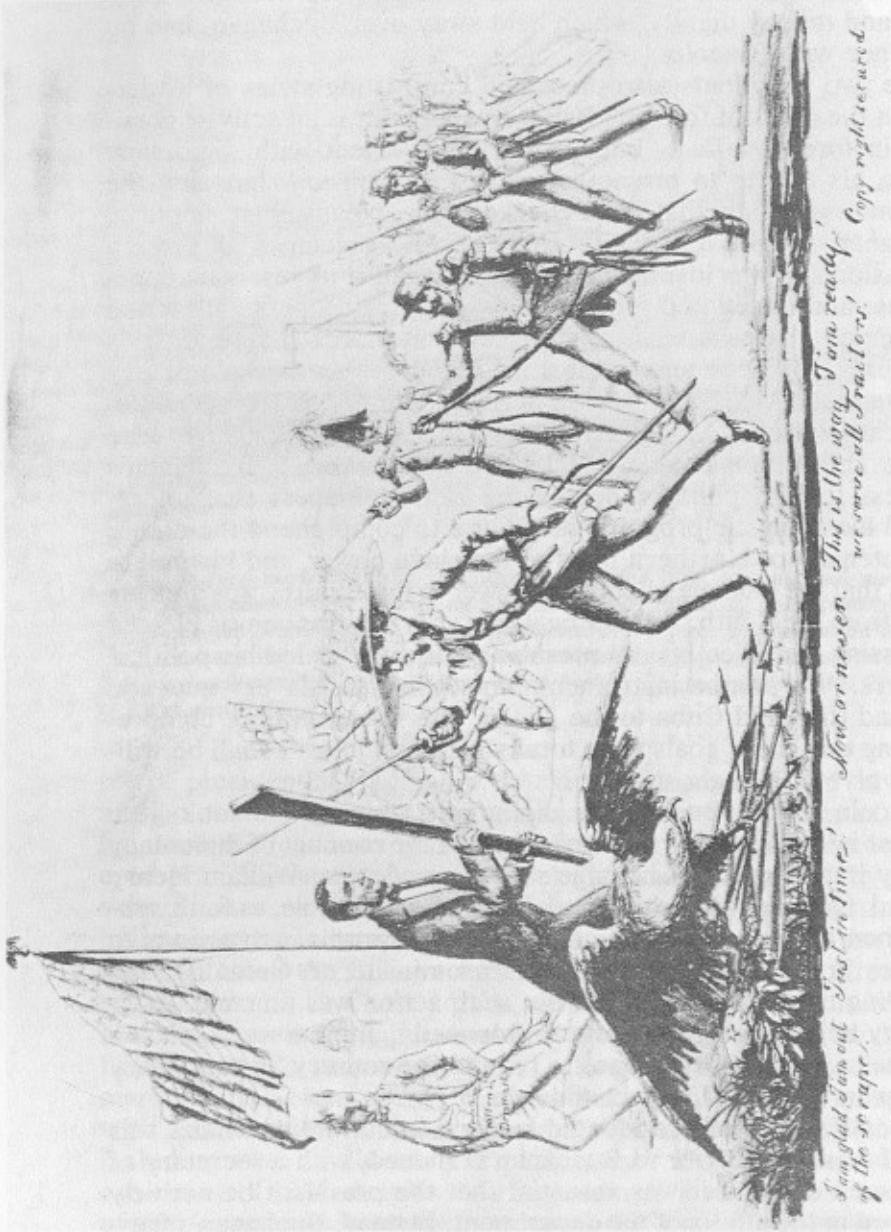
while he is right and PART with him when he goes wrong."[20] Jealousy and touchy dignity, which held sway over Buchanan, had no influence with Lincoln.

The two presidents also presented contrasting styles of leadership in the areas of foreign affairs. Buchanan was an activist president in foreign affairs, both in his involvement with diplomacy and in his efforts to promote American expansion. Ignoring the sectional tensions that had checked the expansionist impulse, Buchanan sought to acquire Cuba, a key objective of slavery expansionists; was insufficiently vigilant against filibustering expeditions; and negotiated a one-sided treaty with a political faction in Mexico that established a protectorate over that country's northern provinces and authorized unilateral American military intervention. A coalition of Southern moderates and Northern Republicans rejected this treaty, which clearly was intended to lead to the annexation of additional Mexican territory.[21] Buchanan's reckless foreign policy reflected the same blindness that undermined his domestic program: his failure to comprehend the nature and intensity of Northern fears of the slave power, and his failure to see that the balance of political power in the country was shifting away from the South. A letter he wrote shortly after he was elected discussing his objectives as president starkly revealed his political blinders. "If I can be instrumental in settling the slavery question . . . and then add Cuba to the Union," he wrote without comprehending that these goals were totally incompatible, "I shall be willing to give up the ghost."[22]

Lincoln lacked Buchanan's diplomatic training and took little interest in foreign affairs. Instead, he left the conduct of diplomacy largely in the hands of his able secretary of state, William Henry Seward. Occasionally Lincoln took a more active role, as for example when he toned down the language of Seward's instructions to Charles Francis Adams, the American minister to Great Britain, following the outbreak of war, but such action was unusual. After a rocky beginning, when Seward proposed fighting a war against a European power as the means to reunite the country, the secretary soon won the president's confidence.[23]

Lincoln's style of presidential leadership on foreign affairs was not inherently superior to Buchanan's. Indeed, with a secretary of state such as Cass it was essential that the president be actively involved in the affairs of the department. Instead, Buchanan's frustrations grew out of the fact that his policies were ill-advised.

Lincoln devoted his attention instead to military affairs. He took an active role in the conduct of the war, both in the selection of



Cartoon from 1861 shows the new Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, vigorously engaging secessionists, while former President James Buchanan, in devil's horns, slinks off stage, muttering, "I am glad I'm out. Just in time!" Courtesy of Dickinson College.

commanders and in the determination of strategy. While prodding his often sluggish generals forward, he did not hesitate to intervene as commander in chief and counteract their plans. A good example was when he detached part of George B. McClellan's army during the ill-fated peninsular campaign to protect the capital at Washington. Lincoln was a much more activist president on military affairs than on foreign affairs and on most domestic policies. His activity did not stem from any extensive military experience, which was limited to a brief service in the Illinois militia during the Black Hawk War. Instead, it reflected the sobering effect of the Union military's disastrous performance at the beginning of the war, and his understanding that the responsibility and the blame would rest with him as commander in chief. Lincoln soon lost faith in Winfield Scott, an imposing military figure but now well past his prime, and discovered that Henry Halleck, whom he brought to Washington in 1862 to advise him, was useless in such matters.[24] Instead, he soon came to rely on himself, carefully listening to advice from his generals but making decisions himself. This process began after the Battle of Bull Run and continued throughout the war. Lincoln's intervention varied according to his faith in the commanding general. He was less active in dealing with Grant and Sherman, who shared his fundamental strategic outlook, than he was with more laggard generals such as McClellan and Don Carlos Buell.[25]

Lincoln was also a more effective party leader than Buchanan. Political parties in the nineteenth century were held together by the glue of patronage: "to the victor belong the spoils," a New York politician once commented. Consequently, both Buchanan and Lincoln devoted considerable attention to these appointments. On occasion Lincoln pretended to be above such sordid political details, as for example when he told a group of Pennsylvania party leaders, "You know I was never a contriver; I don't know much about how things are done in politics."[26] Nothing was further from the truth. David Donald has argued that "the secret of Lincoln's success is simple: he was an astute and dexterous operator of the political machine." Neither president had enough offices to satisfy every office seeker, but Lincoln made much more effective use of the patronage because under his policy of "justice to all" he included all party factions in his appointments.[27]

Buchanan, by contrast, refused to recognize the Douglasites from the beginning, and once Douglas had broken with the administration over the attempt to admit Kansas under the proslavery Lecompton Constitution, Buchanan and his advisers waged an all-out war on the Illinois senator's supporters. Douglas loyalists were

abruptly removed from federal office and opponents appointed in their place. This wholesale war on the Douglasites and anti-Lecompton Democrats was especially marked in Illinois, where the administration supported a separate pro-Lecompton Democratic state ticket in 1858 in a vain effort to defeat Douglas. While grounded in fundamental differences of principle, the bitter Douglas-Buchanan feud became increasingly personal, for which the president deserves most of the blame. With the Democratic Party on the defensive in the free states, such internecine warfare was suicidal, as the Democratic debacle in the 1858 Northern congressional elections revealed. In the aftermath of these elections, which decimated the party's regular Northern wing in Congress, the most important task confronting Buchanan was to heal the breach with Douglas. Buchanan, however, refused to take any step in this direction; indeed, he watched approvingly while short-sighted party leaders in the Senate stripped the Illinois senator of his committee chairmanship, which added more fuel to the popular perception of a personal vendetta against Douglas.[28]

Lincoln constantly had to adjudicate disputes among various Republican factions in the different states, but at no time did he single out his critics for political annihilation. Even after Chase left the cabinet following his clumsy attempt to challenge the president for the 1864 nomination, Lincoln did not purge the federal bureaucracy of Chase's allies; indeed, he eventually appointed Chase chief justice of the Supreme Court. Similarly, Lincoln was caught up in the increasingly bitter fight in Maryland between Henry Winter Davis and Montgomery Blair, yet he retained the support of both men. Blair remained loyal even after Lincoln dropped him from the Cabinet in 1864. Despite Davis's vituperative denunciation of the president for refusing to sign the Wade-Davis bill on Reconstruction in 1864, Lincoln, sensing the shifting tide in the state's politics, extended greater recognition to the radicals in Maryland appointments.[29] Lincoln's adroit handling of party critics stands in bold contrast to Buchanan's efforts to purge anti-Lecompton Democrats.

On taking office, Buchanan realized that the most critical problem confronting him was the situation in Kansas. He made an excellent appointment in selecting Robert Walker as the new governor of the territory. Buchanan's powers of persuasion never shown more brightly, for the ambitious Walker did not want the job, which had been a political graveyard for everyone who held it. Before Walker went to Kansas, he and Buchanan agreed any state constitution would be submitted for approval by the bona fide residents

of the territory. Had Buchanan adhered to this policy it would have defused the Kansas crisis. Shortly after he took up his new post, Walker concluded that the cause of slavery was futile in the territory. Consequently, he soon came under fire from Southern leaders in Washington, and under heavy pressure Buchanan abandoned his governor, with disastrous results for himself and his party.[30]

Lincoln, in contrast, could take the political pounding. He stood up to an avalanche of criticism after rescinding John C. Frémont's emancipation edict in Missouri in 1861. He refused to let the radicals force his hand on emancipation in 1862 or on his policy of reconstruction in 1864. He resisted the growing popular cry for peace negotiations in 1864 and effectively deflected the issue by permitting unofficial peace commissioners to go to Richmond, a move that exposed the unwillingness of Jefferson Davis to consider anything less than Southern independence.[31] After endorsing a premature military campaign that resulted in the Union rout at Bull Run, he relied more on his own judgment in strategic matters, a tendency that was reinforced by Henry Halleck's refusal to take responsibility or give advice. He made some unfortunate appointments to army commands, but in the end he found the generals he needed to win the war. He endured personal slights, social humiliation, unprecedented ridicule, and vicious criticism without losing faith in himself or the Union cause.

Neither party was completely united when each man took office, and these divisions worsened over time. But under Buchanan the Democratic Party was torn to shreds by the Lecompton issue and the mounting hostility between Southern Democrats and the Douglasites. Far from ending the feud and healing the breach, Buchanan contributed to it by waging an all-out war against anti-Lecompton Democrats in the North and removing them from office. While more was involved in this division than Buchanan's personal feelings, only he had the power to heal this division. A magnanimous gesture, an appeal for party unity, and some plain talk to Southern Democrats was essential. Instead, the president responded by nurturing petty grievances, voicing a determination to destroy his party opponents, and promoting blatantly pro-Southern policies. The result was the rupture of the party at the 1860 Charleston convention, an outcome orchestrated by Buchanan's advisers on the scene, headed by Slidell and Bright.[32] In the end, the Democrats ran two presidential candidates in 1860, Douglas, who represented the Northern wing of the party, and Vice-President John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, who was nominated by Southern

Democrats. Buchanan ended his term a thoroughly repudiated president. Deserted by his Southern friends, he had no influence in Congress, even among Democrats, and was openly ridiculed. Few presidents have left office with less influence over their party than Buchanan. By his retirement he was truly a man without a party, rejected by virtually everyone and without prestige or influence.[33]

Lincoln also confronted a deepening division in his party, especially over the issues of slavery, war policy, and reconstruction. As the war dragged on, the Radicals became more vociferous in their condemnation of the president and his policies. But Lincoln handled this division much more effectively. With an eye to party harmony, he granted the Radicals honesty of purpose. As he told his secretary, John Hay, "They are nearer to me than the other side, in thought and sentiment, though bitterly hostile to me personally. They are utterly lawless—the unhandiest devils in the world to deal with—but after all their faces are set Zionwards."[34] Moreover, time and again he effectively outmaneuvered the Radicals and defeated their efforts to dictate policy. As agitation to make emancipation a Union war aim intensified in the party, Lincoln undercut the Radicals by approving the First and then the Second Confiscation Act. Although he signed the second act, which provided for the emancipation of any slave owned by a disloyal master, Lincoln ignored the law and continued to pursue his own policy on slavery. Radicals might fume privately, or grumble about Lincoln's lack of purpose, but they were powerless to check him. Few participated in the movement to nominate a separate ticket in 1864, and any hope to prevent Lincoln's nomination at the Union convention quickly ended with the election of so many federal officeholders, all loyal Lincoln men, as delegates. Despite more than three years of criticism that he was too indecisive and not up to the task before him, Lincoln was easily renominated by the Republican convention in 1864. Lincoln's ability to keep policy in his own hands, to retain the support of the federal bureaucracy, and easily win renomination were all testimony to his effective party leadership. A number of Republicans were unhappy with Lincoln, but they could not prevent his renomination.[35]

Another critical component of presidential leadership is relations with Congress. In dealing with the legislative branch, neither Buchanan nor Lincoln was an activist president in the modern sense of the term. While they recommended general policies, they generally did not submit legislation to Congress.

Lincoln's philosophy harked back to the principles of the Whig

Party. "My political education strongly inclines me against a very free use of any . . . means, by the Executive, to control the legislation of the country," he affirmed in a speech as president-elect. "As a rule, I think it better that congress should originate, as well as perfect its measures, without external bias."[36] Thus, while he was a firm believer in using government power to promote economic development, he showed little interest in the precise form of economic legislation passed during the war, leaving it largely to Congress to frame such important legislation as the Homestead Act, the Land Grant College Act, the protective tariff, and the national banking laws. Indeed, he largely relied on Chase to deal with Congress on matters of taxes, bonds, and banking. Once, when the secretary of the treasury sought his advice on a financial matter, Lincoln replied with less than complete candor, "You understand these things. I do not."[37] Only Chase's insistence that the outcome in Congress hinged on presidential action induced Lincoln to lobby personally for passage of the National Banking Act of 1863.

Lincoln's most active role in legislative matters occurred on the issue of slavery. Again, this reflected Lincoln's basic belief that the question of emancipation and Union war aims was his responsibility as commander in chief, and not that of Congress, since the Constitution gave Congress no jurisdiction over slavery in the states. As Lincoln expressed his constitutional view on one occasion, "I conceive that I may in an emergency do things on military grounds which cannot be done constitutionally by Congress."[38] In his annual message in 1861, Lincoln urged Congress to adopt a plan to finance gradual emancipation in the border states. When Congress failed to act on the matter, Lincoln sent specific legislation to Congress. In the summer of that year, when Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act, Lincoln forced a modification of the act by threatening to veto it until Congress passed an explanatory resolution meeting his objections, which it did. (Though he then signed the bill, he sent the veto message he had drafted to Congress anyway.)[39] Finally, following his reelection, he threw all of his influence behind the drive to gain the last few votes needed in the House of Representatives to pass the proposed Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery. He made lavish use of the patronage to win the votes of a handful of Northern Democrats, which enabled the amendment to pass and be sent to the states for ratification. Never before as president had Lincoln taken such an active and concerted role in securing legislation.[40]

Buchanan was even less active, viewing the president's respon-

sibility as simply to approve or disapprove laws Congress passed. The most concerted intervention by his administration was during the unsuccessful struggle to get Congress to approve the Lecompton Constitution and in the ensuing negotiations to find a way out of the stalemate that produced the English bill. Buchanan was more energetic, however, in using the veto. Lincoln vetoed only one important piece of legislation during his presidency, the Wade-Davis bill, which he believed infringed on his power as president to establish a program of reconstruction. Buchanan, on the other hand, vetoed several pieces of legislation that would have economically benefited the North, including a homestead bill, a bill to expedite overland mail to California, and a bill to grant public land to support agricultural colleges. These vetoes, done at the behest of Southern politicians, further weakened the Democratic Party in the free states and did nothing to shore up the president's sagging popularity.[41]

Neither president enjoyed especially harmonious relations with Congress, but again Buchanan fared worse. His problems began with his ill-fated decision to endorse the Lecompton Constitution, which would have made Kansas a slave state. Douglas broke with the president and led a small number of Northern representatives into open rebellion. His anger roused by this challenge to his leadership, Buchanan refused any compromise and vowed to force Lecompton, as he phrased it, "naked through the House."[42] He pulled out all the stops to secure the votes in the House to admit Kansas under the Lecompton Constitution, including allegations of outright bribery. Rarely had Washington witnessed such a titanic struggle or more aggressive intervention in congressional affairs by the executive branch. Yet in the end Buchanan's humiliation was complete. The Lecompton Constitution was rejected, the unscrupulous lobbying campaign was soon exposed to public eyes, and a majority of Northern Democrats in Congress was estranged from the administration.

Buchanan's relations with Congress reached the nadir in the secession crisis. Disowned by a majority of his party and repudiated by the recent national election, Buchanan could have salvaged his leadership only by decisive action. With his cabinet deeply divided, such a response from the indecisive chief executive was impossible. Instead, he destroyed whatever credibility he had left by adopting the constitutional position that secession was illegal but he had no power to coerce a state.[43] He left it to Congress to decide whether new legislation was required to deal with secession. Only Congress, he insisted, could "authorize the employment of military

OLD MOTHER BUCHANAN AT WHEATLAND.

Cartoon during the secession crisis depicts Buchanan as a feckless granny, unable to cope with the secession of South Carolina and its ramifications. Courtesy of Dickinson College.

force." The president had "no authority to decided what shall be the relations between the Federal Government and South Carolina." In his memoirs, he emphasized the Congress had refused to pass any legislation to call up volunteers or employ force, but the truth was Buchanan did not want such legislation enacted.[44] Buchanan's goal was simply to hang on for the remainder of his term, refuse to recognize secession, and turn the problem over to Lincoln. "It was his policy to preserve the peace if possible," Secretary of War Joseph Holt explained, "and hand over the Government intact to his sucessor."[45]

Because of his hesitant response to secession, false charges of the president's complicity in disunion and treason soon began to circulate. Buchanan found himself virtually without political support: Republicans dismissed him as a weakling and a coward and called for his impeachment, Douglas Democrats wanted nothing to do with him, and his Southern allies quickly deserted him, leaving him a bitter and broken man. According to one supporter, the harried president was "execrated now by four-fifths of the people of all parties."[46] In this situation, Congress went out of its way to

affirm publicly its lack of confidence in the chief executive, routinely voting down various laws to deal with the crisis and refusing to consider his appointments to fill federal vacancies caused by the resignation of secessionists.

Lincoln also found Congress a trial. Once a senator came to the White House and launched into a vituperative denunciation of the president and his policies and ended with the warning, "Sir you are within one mile of Hell!" To which a smiling Lincoln replied, "Yes, . . . it is just one mile to the Capitol!"[47] Determined to respond vigorously and conduct the war according to policies he set, he refused to allow himself to be hamstrung by the lack of congressional authorization, and he had no illusions about the role of Congress in waging the war. With the outbreak of hostilities, he called Congress into special session to meet on 4 July, thereby giving himself a free hand for more than two months. Lincoln took full advantage of this period, taking a series of steps by executive edict that clearly exceeded his legal authority. Lincoln felt he had to act decisively, which was true, but it is clear he also did not want any interference by Congress. When Congress convened, it had little choice but to ratify Lincoln's actions after the fact. Indeed, it was not just coincidence that Lincoln's most decisive assertions of presidential power normally occurred when Congress was not in session.[48]

Still, Lincoln's relations with the legislative branch never descended to the level of the Buchanan years. This more harmonious relationship reflected in part the fact that Lincoln was much more tactful and flexible in his approach. As a minority president and the Republicans' first chief executive, Lincoln was also more sensitive about maintaining party unity. He shrewdly steered a middle ground between the conservatives and Radicals in his party, satisfying neither fully but keeping both united in their opposition to the Democrats. Had he lived, he would have reached some accommodation with his party critics over the question of Reconstruction. Relations between the president and Congress no doubt would have been strained at times, but they never would have reached the paralysis of the final months of Buchanan's administration, or during the presidency of Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson.

A striking example of Lincoln's astuteness and his ability to outmaneuver his congressional critics was the cabinet crisis in December 1862. Egged on by Chase's allegations that Lincoln was controlled by Seward, who purportedly opposed a vigorous prosecution of the war, and that the rest of the cabinet was ignored, a committee of Republican senators came to the White House to demand a shake-up of the cabinet. Aware of the origins of this movement, Lincoln arranged for the delegation to meet with him in the presence of the entire cabinet except for Seward. With his cabinet colleagues as witnesses, Chase was forced to declare that the cabinet was in basic agreement on war policy, thus directly contradicting what he had been telling members of Congress privately. Seward had already submitted his resignation, and the next day an embarrassed Chase hesitantly offered his. Drawing on his backwoods heritage, Lincoln explained, "Now I can ride; I have got a pumpkin in each end of my bag."[49] He rejected both resignations, thereby stymieing the Congressional movement to reorganize the cabinet. The crisis ended with Lincoln in firm control of his cabinet and free of congressional dictation. As Leonard Swett, who had observed Lincoln closely for many years in Illinois, remarked, "He handled and moved men remotely as we do pieces upon a chess-board."[50]

Contrast this outcome with Buchanan's famous interview with Stephen A. Douglas prior to the assembling of Congress in December 1857. Cognizant that the proslavery Lecompton Constitution threatened to annihilate the Democratic Party in the free states, Douglas urged Buchanan not to endorse the constitution, which represented the wishes of only a small minority of the residents of Kansas. Far from seeking some understanding with the Illinois senator, Buchanan threatened to end his political career if he did not go along with the administration on this question. He not too subtly reminded Douglas that those Democrats who opposed Andrew Jackson on the bank issue had been destroyed. Unwilling to be read out of the Democratic Party by a man he considered his inferior, Douglas as he reached for his hat defiantly shot back, "Mr. President, I wish you to remember that General Jackson is dead."[51] The situation required more than false bravado and meaningless threats on the president's part; its outcome amply demonstrated the inadequacy of Buchanan's leadership.

Neither Lincoln nor Buchanan had extensive dealings with the judiciary, but a famous example from each man's presidency highlights their different approaches to presidential leadership. Buchanan's most celebrated dealing with the Supreme Court occurred in the Dred Scott case, when he surreptitiously intervened to get Justice Robert Grier of Pennsylvania to join the Southern majority in issuing a broad decision. Privately informed of the Court's pending decision, Buchanan announced in his inaugural address that the Court would soon render its decision. "To their decision, in

common with all good citizens," he proclaimed with affected ignorance, "I shall cheerfully submit, whatever this may be."[52]

Buchanan's intervention was improper, but the real failure of his leadership on this matter was not that he exceeded his authority--so did Lincoln on many more occasions, with not nearly as much damage to his reputation—but the ends to which he used this power. Buchanan naively believed that a Supreme Court decision upholding the extreme Southern position on the legality of slavery in the territories would settle the sectional conflict. Instead, the Dred Scott decision was one of the most ill-conceived decisions the Court has ever rendered in its long history, for which Buchanan bears partial responsibility. It angered the North, intensified the sectional conflict, weakened popular sovereignty, which was the only remaining moderate solution to the problem of slavery expansion, and gave nothing of substance to the South. It neither strengthened slavery nor enhanced Southern power. Moreover, it reinforced the growing Northern belief in a slave power; if Buchanan's role in the decision had been known at the time, the outcry in the North would have been even stronger.[53]

During the Civil War, the Supreme Court generally refrained from interfering with the Lincoln administration's war policies. Its celebrated decision in *ex parte Milligan,* striking down military trials of civilians accused of antiwar activities, was not rendered until after the war was over. The most famous clash between Lincoln and the judiciary occurred at the beginning of the war, when Chief Justice Roger Taney, sitting on the circuit court, ruled in the case of *ex parte Merryman* that Lincoln's suspension of the writ of habeas corpus in Maryland was illegal. Lincoln did not shrink from this challenge or hide behind subordinates. Convinced that this was an executive power and that it was necessary to prevent disloyal activity, he instructed his military commanders to disregard Taney's ruling and reaffirmed his expansive view of presidential powers in wartime. Lincoln's action was an ominous precedent that could be used by future presidents far less well intentioned and far more abusive of presidential power than he. But Northern public opinion was generally supportive of his action because of the extraordinary nature of the threat to the government.[54]

Another major source of presidential power is public opinion. As the only member of the federal government elected by all the people, the president is in a unique position to shape and mobilize public opinion; his relationship with the people can provide a great reservoir of power in any clash with the legislative branch. Buchanan proved hopelessly inept at this aspect of governing, displaying a lack of ability to read the public mood and no talent to rouse popular support. Lincoln, in contrast, was a master in these matters.

Adept at using his voluminous private correspondence to gain support, Buchanan had never displayed particular talent as a public speaker or literary stylist. He had received a good education and was an extremely successful lawyer, yet he lacked the ability to elevate his thought out of the ordinary channels. He produced no ringing documents defending his administration's policies, and indeed, in four decades of public service, never coined a memorable phrase or voiced a memorable statement. His failures in this regard were apparent in the struggle over the Lecompton Constitution, and again in the secession crisis. Buchanan was woefully incapable of mobilizing Northern public opinion behind his policy on secession. If ever a president needed to stake out a clear and forceful position and rally public sentiment behind it, it was then; if ever a president failed utterly, it was then.

While he was largely self-educated, having by his calculation less than a year of formal schooling, Abraham Lincoln was an accomplished literary craftsman. He was also a superb debater, well versed in appealing to the ordinary folk. His speeches and writings possess an eloquence few presidents have ever approached. Time and again during the war, in his public documents, he displayed unrivaled ability to rouse the popular emotions by placing the struggle in its broadest context and rooting it in the most basic American values. In his special message to Congress on 4 July 1861, he described the war as part of the larger struggle for democracy and opportunity throughout the world: "This is essentially a People's contest. On the side of the Union, it is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders—to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all—to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life."[55] His letter to James Conkling on emancipation and to Erastus Corning on civil liberties demonstrated his fundamental decency and good sense. The Gettysburg Address, the most famous presidential speech ever delivered, concisely stated the meaning of the war, and the Second Inaugural, given on the eve of victory, was remarkable for its humility and its compassion. Lincoln's ability to reach out to the common people of his society, from whose ranks he had risen, was displayed throughout his presidency, and provided him a solid base of popular support. In fact, Lincoln was probably more popular with the

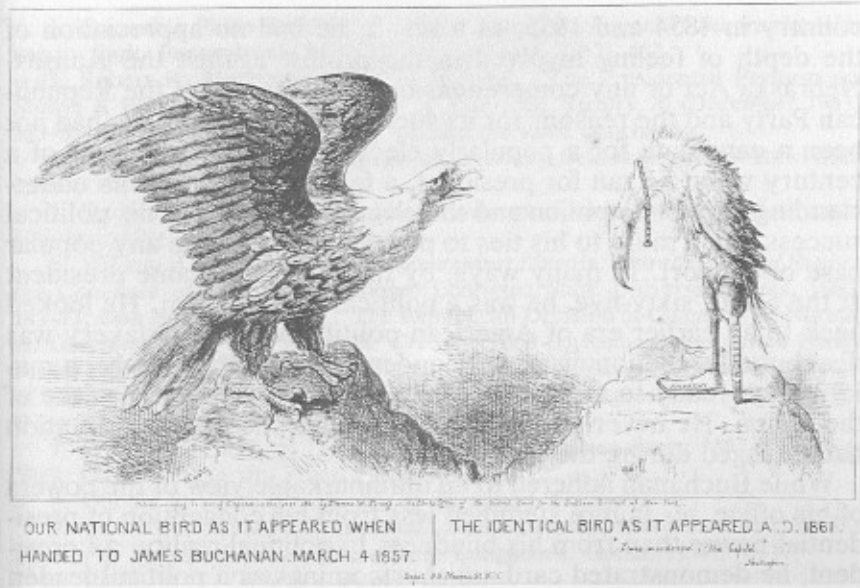
people than he was with the leaders of his party, as his easy renomination in 1864 demonstrated.

In every regard, Lincoln proved a superior president to Buchanan. He was an extraordinary politician, able to work with men of diverse viewpoints on a broad range of issues. He displayed an uncanny feel for public opinion and was unrivaled in his ability to shape and influence popular feelings. He had the ability to assess character, to weigh alternatives, and to clearly perceive the consequences of his actions. He did not blind himself to political reality or surround himself with individuals who thought like he did on all matters. While he preferred harmony to conflict, he did not believe it was possible to establish an effective administration on the ideal of consensus.

Like other strong presidents, Lincoln took an expansive view of his powers. Whether he would have been as active a president had the war not occurred is doubtful since he grounded his claim of special powers on his role as a commander in chief. The powers Lincoln exercised were breathtaking in their extent and significance. He spent money without congressional authorization, suspended the writ of habeas corpus throughout the Union, authorized military trials of civilians, proclaimed a blockade, initiated a program of reconstruction, dictated the terms for peace, and abolished slavery by presidential edict. He walked the thin line between failing to respond vigorously and abuse of power with remarkable deftness. Exercising unprecedented power, he was neither corrupted by it nor viewed it as an end in itself.

After a number of disappointments, his domestic and military policies finally bore fruit and the Union prevailed in the war. The Union was saved and slavery abolished, two accomplishments that have enshrined Lincoln in the national memory. Lincoln was fortunate that the military tide turned before the 1864 election. Had he left office in 1862 or even 1863, historians undoubtedly would rank him a failure.

Buchanan enjoyed no similar success. A useful and talented subordinate when guided by a strong hand like James K. Polk's, Buchanan was far less effective as the leader of a national administration. Buchanan displayed three fundamental shortcomings as president. First, he disliked conflict and confrontation, and thus selected his cabinet on grounds of personal compatibility rather than ability, usefulness, or representativeness. Second, he sought to rule by consensus in a period when party consensus was impossible. His conception of the administration, in which the president was the first among equals, was a severe handicap to devising effec-



Satirical cartoon about the state of the Union that suggests Buchanan utterly failed in his cardinal responsibility as president of the United States. Courtesy of Dickinson College.

tive policies, a shortcoming exacerbated by his unwillingness to consider dissenting points of view. Effective presidents must handle conflict and confront divergent viewpoints. As his popularity dropped, Buchanan psychologically withdrew into his narrow circle of advisers and cronies; he wailed bitterly over the desertion of some of his closest friends and political allies.

But Buchanan was hurt most of all by the policies he followed. He manifested little comprehension of public opinion, lacked the ability to shape and mobilize popular sentiment, and repeatedly failed to anticipate correctly the consequences of his actions. Buchanan's obliviousness to political reality is difficult to explain, primarily because it was so unrelenting. But beyond his indecisive nature, his close personal friendships with Southerners, his moral indifference to the institution of slavery, and his emotional dependence on his friends, several other factors can be cited. He came from Pennsylvania, a state where antislavery sentiment was weak, which hindered his developing a sound understanding of the antislavery movement. Instead, he persisted in lumping abolitionism with other, more moderate forms of antislavery sentiment. This basic misperception was compounded by his absence from the

country in 1854 and 1855; as a result, he had no appreciation of the depth of feeling involved in the protest against the Kansas-Nebraska Act or any comprehension of the nature of the Republican Party and the reasons for its success. Furthermore, he had not been a candidate for a popularly elected office for a quarter of a century when he ran for president, a fact that lessened his understanding of public opinion and the electorate. He owed his political success much more to his ties to party leaders than to any popular base of support. In many ways, by the time he became president at the age of sixty-five, he was a political anachronism. He looked back to an earlier era of American politics, when antislavery was disreputable, sectionalism was condemned, and the Northern majority was ready to make concessions to the South for the sake of the Union. He never appreciated how much the political situation had changed during the past few years.

While Buchanan adhered to an unremarkable view of the powers of his office, his failure stemmed less from his conception of presidential power than from his blindness to political reality. As president, he demonstrated cardinal shortcomings as a political leader. He was unable to judge character and to assess accurately men's usefulness. Remarkably sensitive to Southern fears, he betrayed not the slightest comprehension of Northern public opinion and lacked the ability to shape and mobilize opinion in either section. And finally, he lacked the ability to clearly weigh the consequences of actions and policies.

The result of these shortcomings was a series of political disasters, the cumulative effect of which was to wreck his party and his presidency. Few presidents have done more in four years to bring the opposing party to power. Aided by the proslavery Dred Scott decision, in which Buchanan played a direct and improper role; the unprecedented level of graft and corruption that marred his term in office; the administration's economic policies, which alienated important groups in the North; the Lecompton struggle, which inflamed sectional passions and reinvigorated the slavery-extension issue; and the split of the Democratic Party, which Buchanan's policies precipitated and his small-mindedness continued, the Republican Party carried the 1860 presidential election. This was precisely the result he had pledged to prevent on taking office. When he left Washington and returned to Wheatland in March 1861, the dark clouds of the sectional storm had gathered, and civil war was only a few weeks away.

Notes

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9. Quoted in David H. Donald, ed., *Inside Lincoln's Cabinet: The Civil War Diaries of Salmon P. Chase* (New York: Longman's, Green, 1954), 16–17.
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15. Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 551–52.
16. Quoted in Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln,* 2 vols. (New York: 1950), 1:246.
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43. Stampp, *And the War Came,* 53–57, 60.
44. Ibid., 81, 104, 111; Potter, *Impending Crisis,* 521–22n.
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46. Sidney Webster quoted in ibid., 73.
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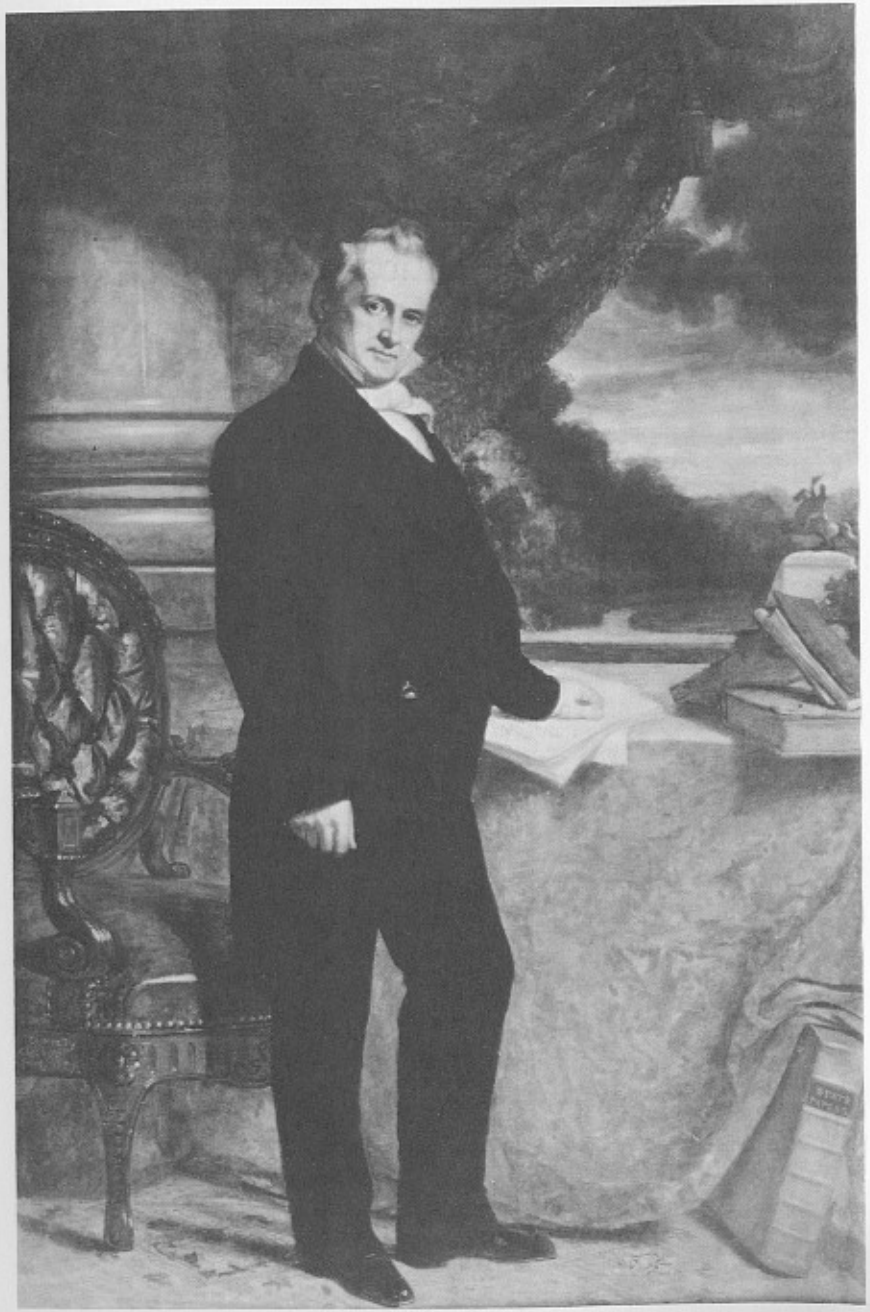
James Buchanan, the Neutrality Laws, and American Invasions of Nicaragua

ROBERT E. MAY

WHEN IT COMES TO RATINGS OF AMERICAN CHIEF EXECUTIVES, President James Buchanan occupies a lowly rank. Though there are dissenting voices such as that of biographer Philip Shriver Klein,[1] historians long ago reached a consensus that Pennsylvania's only president did his country a terrible disservice by promoting policies that aggravated the sectional crisis of the 1850s: he imposed on the Supreme Court for the Dred Scott decision and he tried to impose the Lecompton Constitution on a free-soil majority in Kansas. His patronage mistakes and inability to suppress corruption within his cabinet, moreover, facilitated the Republican Party triumph that triggered Southern secession. Once faced with disunion, the conventional wisdom has it, Buchanan ducked responsibility by an unmanly dumping of the mess onto the laps of his country's congressmen and, ultimately, his successor in the White House.[2] Buchanan, we are reminded ad infinitum, was no General Jackson!

Historians, as Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing recognize in their study of presidential ratings, are far less likely to consider foreign policies crucial when assessing nineteenth-century presidents than in evaluations of their twentieth-century successors: world power status following the Spanish-American War heightened the salience of diplomatic concerns and meant that American decision making would have increased impact on other nations. Certainly this observation applies to James Buchanan's administration, given its relationship to the seminal domestic event in American history—the Civil War. Unlike many successors, and even some earlier chief executives such as James Monroe and James K. Polk, whose names are connected with foreign affairs, Buchanan is remembered primarily for his domestic policies. Nevertheless, Buchanan's conduct of diplomacy is not, and has not been, irrelevant to assessments of his presidential record. Today, I would like you to ponder this "other" side of the Buchanan administration.



President James Buchanan, by George P. A. Healey. Courtesy of Dickinson College.

James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s

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