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James Buchanan and the Secession Crisis

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I

At first glance there were few American statesmen better placed to cope with the secession crisis than James Buchanan. By the time it erupted the President had not only been in the White House for more than three years; for almost forty years he had been at or close to the centre of politics. He had served in each house of Congress for over a decade, had been Minister to Russia and to the Court of St James and had been Secretary of State. His election to the presidency in 1856 owed much to a widespread, and surely plausible, assumption that his would be above all a safe pair of hands.[1]

In fact his personal opinions and his previous political experience ill prepared Buchanan for the crisis that was to engulf the nation after the election of Abraham Lincoln. It was not, however, so much that Buchanan alone, or even that members of his party alone, could not cope. Rather the crisis posed problems that went far beyond the capacity of statesmen on all sides, whether they were Democrats or Republicans, secessionists or Unionists, to manage. As the nation moved closer towards, and finally into, war it became apparent that no one was in control of events. A war that

neither northerners nor southerners wanted or intended arrived and brought with it carnage and bloodshed on an unprecedented scale.

Are we dealing then, as some historians have argued, with a failure of statesmanship on the part of a "blundering generation" of Americans, a generation whose personal shortcomings propelled the nation into war?[2] This is a tempting conclusion but it is one that should be resisted. Buchanan and those who presided over the final, hectic months of the antebellum Republic were often acting as their most deeply held principles required. Even when their actions were inconsistent or their attitudes ambivalent, those attitudes and actions often registered the tensions or the contradictions within their world views. And those world views or ideologies were themselves deeply rooted in the lived experience and the material conditions of millions of Americans. The war and the descent into it were only superficially the product of individual errors or shortcomings. The real causes were far more deeply rooted.[3]

II

James Buchanan was, of course, a Democrat and he was convinced that the principles of the Democratic party could and would steer the nation through its present adversities. This had been one of his governing assumptions for many decades but it was one that would not serve him well in the final months prior to the conflagration of 1861.

It is difficult for the modern observer to appreciate the depth of party loyalty in the antebellum Republic.[4] And it was above all the Democratic party that commanded this loyalty. The typical Democrat believed that the nation's extraordinary economic and territorial growth together with the glorious history that

its democratic institutions exhibited were attributable to the policies and practices that its governments, both state and Federal but especially Federal, had pursued. And most of the time, as Democrats never tired of reminding both themselves and the electorate, the Federal government had been in the hands of the Democratic party (including its Jeffersonian Republican antecedent).

In truth the Democratic party was more akin to a church than to a modern-day political party. Democratic partisans – and there were few more partisan Democrats than James Buchanan - were wont to review the past and to conclude not merely that previous triumphs were attributable to Democratic policies but that the underlying principles of the Democratic creed, if adhered to, would ensure the wellbeing of the nation indefinitely. As Buchanan put it in the mid-1840s, when the slavery question was beginning to threaten national unity, the "best security" of Democrats was "in the hour of danger … to cling fast to their time-honoured principles."[5]

What were these principles? For Democrats like Buchanan the key was to maintain the traditional rights of the states and to ensure that the Federal government remained, in most spheres at any rate, inactive. "The best government," Democrats had been proclaiming for many decades, "is that which governs least." This meant, as far as the sectional controversy was concerned, leaving the states free to go their own way. They should be free to choose slavery or to reject it, unencumbered by opinion elsewhere. In the mid-1850s the Kansas-Nebraska Act had extended this principle by insisting that the Federal government renounce the powers that it had previously exercised in relation to slavery in the territories. The Act clothed the territories of Kansas and Nebraska (as the Compromise of 1850 had clothed those of New Mexico and Utah) with the same powers as states: they too would be able to determine the fate

of slavery within their own boundaries, unfettered by the actions of the Federal government.

Northern Democrats like Buchanan were not expected to, and usually did not, approve of slavery in the abstract, still less proclaim its superiority, in political, moral or economic terms, to free labour. But the Democratic creed, dating back to Jefferson, though not avowedly proslavery, tended strongly to dispel antislavery sentiment and disable the antislavery movement. Though not all Democrats followed the party line here[6], mainstream Democrats believed in *laissez-faire* not only in the economic realm but also where moral questions were concerned: all "men" were to be allowed to determine their own views of the righteousness or otherwise of slavery uncoerced by government, and especially uncoerced by the Federal government. But if this view might have led members of the party to an uncompromising opposition to slavery (which men after all would volunteer to be enslaved?), it instead, when allied to Democratic views of race, had precisely the opposite effect. For the typical Democrat, north or south, held that the nation's racial minorities (Native Americans, African Americans whether slave or free) were scarcely "men" at all. They thus lacked the rights that white Americans would otherwise be bound to respect. The Democrats' moral individualism, as we may term it, thus led, rather paradoxically, to an insistence that white men should be left free to determine whether they would, or would not, enslave black men and women.

These principles did not merely, for most Democrats, militate against antislavery; they left them simply unable to comprehend the moral outrage that many northerners felt about slavery. If African Americans were not fit citizens of the Republic and if southerners would not tolerate northern interference with their slaves

then was it not sheer folly for northerners to agitate the question? By 1860 this had been Buchanan's view for a generation

The President, in common with many other northerners and especially northern Democrats, drew several important conclusions from this reasoning. The first was that antislavery, if sincere, was a cause embraced only by the zealot, the fanatic who would jeopardise the continued existence of the American Republic for the sake of a degraded race. The second followed from the first: much antislavery was not at all sincere; it was merely a cloak for the advancement of certain northern economic interests. The third was still more important: such antislavery sentiment was ephemeral. It would soon dissolve and the nation would be able to resume its glorious course.

Thus Democrats like Buchanan constantly believed that the slavery controversy was about to be resolved. Unable to see any compelling moral, political or economic case against slavery in the southern states or even the territories, they repeatedly announced that the slavery question was being artificially stirred up by northerners. In time, they believed, it would fade away, provided that the Democratic party remain true to its "time-honoured principles." Indeed Buchanan regularly asserted that the slavery issue was, or soon would be, in headlong retreat. This was his message in 1856 just before assuming the presidency, again in 1857 in the aftermath of the enormously controversial Dred Scott decision, and even in 1860 when he asserted that John Brown's raid into Harpers Ferry, Virginia would actually create, by virtue of a reaction within the general public, greater sectional harmony. These attitudes and assumptions and the hopelessly inaccurate predictions that they generated were widespread within the Democratic party; they left Buchanan fumbling for a response to the crisis of 1860/1861.[7]

Prior to the election of 1860 the President (who had not of course been a candidate himself) made it clear where his loyalties lay. The split in the Democratic party left Stephen A. Douglas as the candidate favoured by the vast majority of northerners, John C. Breckinridge the choice of a large majority of southerners. But if few northerners favored Breckinridge, the President was one of those few. Buchanan had broken with Douglas at the time of the attempted admission of Kansas into the Union, which the Illinoisan had refused to accept on the grounds that established democratic procedures had not been observed. The President, however, had swallowed any reservations he might have had. Even in 1856-1857 he had owed his elevation essentially to the South; by 1860 he was more than ever in southerners' debt. By the time of the election Breckinridge and Buchanan, unlike Douglas and his supporters, were both committed to the policy of a Federal slave code (which would guarantee slaveholders' rights in any territory). Such a policy, which denied to both Congress and its inhabitants the right of a territory to exclude slavery, was anathema to most northerners.[8]

Buchanan here showed his persistent blindness to the slavery controversy. Although he did not claim that secession would be justified in the event of a Republican victory, he neither repudiated the claim when Breckinridge supporters made it nor dissociated himself from those who used it to intimidate voters into supporting them. In other words during the campaign Buchanan inclined strongly to a southern (though not an overtly secessionist) stance.[9]

Unfortunately the orthodox, traditional Democratic policies to which the President clung had little to offer by the time the sectional controversy had reached these heights. Both wings of the party in 1860 agreed that Congress should not rule either for or against slavery in a given territory. Advocates of a slave code claimed

that their policy would simply give slaveholders the right to go into a territory with their slaves and be protected there, just as holders of other property were protected. Their opponents retorted, however, that, given the nature of slavery and the refusal of slaveholders to allow open discussion of its merits, such a policy would allow the slaveholding minority in a territory to impose draconian restrictions on the freedom of (antislavery) opinion and (antislavery) expression similar to those that had disfigured Kansas. Thus each side demanded equality; each approach necessarily violated it. Once again Buchanan – together with his fellow Democrats - was blind to these considerations.

Instead, after the election results were known, the President continued to favour a slave code, the very policy that a huge majority of northerners and a majority of voters in the nation as a whole had just rejected. Nothing could more vividly illustrate the bankruptcy of the "time-honoured" principles of the Democratic party. But once again this mistake was not merely an individual aberration; it flowed from the ideology of the Democratic party. And it was no coincidence that that party, with its traditional base in the South, where slavery was so deeply entrenched, embraced a set of principles which steadily undercut the antislavery movement. Democratic principles offered great support, sometimes overt, often covert, to slavery.[10]

III

Election day was November 6. As soon as it became apparent that Lincoln had won, talk of secession became more widespread than ever before. The Constitution meant that Lincoln would surely be installed in the White House but it also meant that he

would not occupy it until March 4, almost four months away. Buchanan would, of course, remain in charge for this period.[11]

One of the reasons the President and other Democrats had traditionally favoured the South was their determination to maintain the Union, the principal threat to which, they believed, lay in the antislavery movement. But when southerners now talked of secession the result was a fracturing of Democratic ideology. In effect, for northerners like Buchanan, their dedication to the Union clashed with their opposition to the antislavery movement and their sympathy with the South. However deep that sympathy, most of them could not countenance the breakup of their nation. But Democratic principles did not leave them well placed to resolve these contradictions. The result was that, rather than maintain a single, coherent policy, the President, over the coming weeks and months, would often hesitate or vacillate; the fracturing of Democratic ideology was responsible.

As soon as it was known that Lincoln had been elected, and secession was threatened, politicians were compelled to react. Most Republicans dismissed these threats as idle; they were convinced that southerners were merely bluffing, seeking, as ever, to intimidate weak northerners. This reminds us that it was not only the President and the Democratic party that were unable fully to grasp the events of the secession crisis. It also reminds us that, like the Democrats, Republicans perceived events through an ideological prism. Believing that the northern social order was natural and the southern, because of slavery, grossly unnatural, Republicans typically assumed that the slaveholders needed the Union to shore up an otherwise rickety social system. These perceptions were, in their turn, grounded in northerners' concrete experiences of their social order which was held to be inherently harmonious and benign. As a result, however little they might appreciate northern antislavery

sentiment, northern Democrats at least had a superior understanding of southern fears and of possible southern actions. Buchanan himself realised, much earlier than Lincoln or William Seward, that southerners were in earnest when they threatened secession and that a crisis was at hand.[12]

To recognise the problem was one thing, to solve it another. The President now received hopelessly conflicting advice from those around him. Even before the election Winfield Scott, Commanding General of the United States Army, had urged the President immediately to garrison nine southern forts, in order to prevent their seizure by secessionists. This would certainly have been construed by a huge majority of southerners as an extremely hostile act. Buchanan accordingly ignored the advice and turned instead to his Cabinet. But if he had hoped the Cabinet would speak with a single voice, he was to be hugely disappointed. Secretary of the Interior Jacob Thompson and Secretary of the Treasury Howell Cobb, of Mississippi and Georgia respectively, argued that secession was entirely legal and constitutional, while Lewis Cass of Michigan and Jeremiah Black of Pennsylvania, Secretary of State and Attorney General respectively, took the opposite view and wanted troops sent to reinforce at least some of the Federal forts in the South. They together with Secretary of the Navy Isaac Toucey of Connecticut and Postmaster General Joseph Holt, denied the legality of secession. The Cabinet was deeply divided.[13]

At one stage, the President was indeed tempted to send additional troops into the South but, for the time being at least, decided against it, almost certainly out of fear that the southerners in his cabinet would resign in protest. Instead he tried to maintain an even-handed approach. It was one which at first continued to exhibit his pro-southern sympathies, whilst refusing to recognise the legitimacy of secession. In

his fourth and final Annual Message to Congress on December 3 1860, some four weeks after the election, Buchanan presented his analysis of the current situation.[14]

Acknowledging the controversies that existed over both the fugitive slave issue and the question of slavery in the territories, he implied that they were attributable to northern aggression, since "time and reflection" alone on the part of the North might have "applied the remedy" to the nation's ills. Then he became still more explicit in his criticisms of the North when he affirmed that the "immediate peril arises, not so much from these causes [the territorial and fugitive slaves issues] as from the fact that the incessant and violent agitation of the slavery question throughout the North for the last quarter of a century has at length produced its malign influence on the slaves and inspired them with vague notions of freedom." As a result southerners were fearful of "servile insurrections" and "a sense of security no longer exists around the family altar." If northern agitation were to continue and these fears were to spread so that they became pervasive within the South then "disunion will become inevitable." The President then seemed to justify disunion in such circumstances on the grounds that "self-preservation is the first law of nature, and has been implanted in the heart of man by his Creator for the wisest purpose." But this point had not yet been reached and it was up to northerners to ensure that it was never reached.

The solution was simple: "how easy" the President exclaimed, "would it be for the American people to settle the slavery question forever and to restore peace and harmony to this distracted country!" "They, and they alone," he affirmed, "can do it" and all they needed to do – "and all for which the slave States have ever contended" - was "to be let alone and permitted to manage their domestic institutions in their own way." At this point the Democratic commitment to states' rights and laissez-faire

became explicit. "As sovereign States," the southern states, "and they alone," the President declared, "are responsible before God and the world for the slavery existing among them." "The people of the North" were "not more responsible and have no more right to interfere than with similar institutions in Russia or in Brazil." Thus an end to the agitation of the slavery question, agitation that was in any case utterly futile, would speedily resolve the entire crisis.

In the meantime, however, Buchanan observed, southerners should refrain from any precipitate action. Those southerners who were urging secession did so on one of two grounds. Most of them argued that it was permitted by the Constitution: having freely chosen to enter the Union, states were equally free to leave it. Alternatively some secessionists grounded their action in the right to revolution, which, given the origins of their own nation, few Americans rejected. Buchanan set his face against secession, whichever justification were offered. In common with almost all Republicans, and many northern Democrats too, he denied that the Constitution conferred the power on any state to withdraw from the Union. And in common with an at least equally large number of northerners he denied that the sufferings of the South were anywhere near sufficient to warrant a revolutionary response.

Buchanan reminded Congress and the nation that Lincoln had been elected according to the prescribed forms of the Constitution. He added that the President-elect had won only a plurality, not a majority, of the votes in the electoral college, and had triumphed only as a result of a set of circumstances (by which he probably meant the split in the Democratic party) that was unlikely ever to recur. Once again Buchanan implicitly reaffirmed his old view that the slavery controversy could and should be resolved quite easily. Once again he ignored key aspects of that

controversy. Some Republicans, together with virtually all abolitionists, argued that *all* Americans were, in varying degrees, responsible for the moral abomination that was slavery. An even greater number of northerners believed that *all* Americans had a deep economic and political as well as moral stake in the success of free labour in the nation's territories. Buchanan remained oblivious to these considerations.[15]

Most Republicans, having insisted that secession was illegal, then went on to affirm the Federal Government's right to resist it with force. Buchanan, however, refused to take this step. He denied that such a power existed, and specifically denied that the president possessed it. Here his approach was in sharp contrast to the attitude that Andrew Jackson had taken a generation earlier when South Carolina had sought to nullify a Federal tariff. Buchanan was fond of citing Jackson as a Democratic hero and exemplar but his conduct in 1861-1862 contrasted sharply with that of Old Hickory in 1832. Many Americans professed themselves unable to comprehend their President's attitude. Seward, soon to become Lincoln's Secretary of State, scoffed that the President had demonstrated conclusively that "no state has the right to secede unless it wishes to" and that "it is the president's duty to enforce the laws, unless someone opposed him." Such sneering was widespread in the North.[16]

Part of Buchanan's problem lay in the fact that, although he could not tolerate the idea of secession, neither could he see how the Union could endure on the basis of the permanent coercion of one or more of the states. Such coercion would violate, in the most alarming way, the sacred principle of states' rights: it would thus jeopardise the very liberty that the Union was intended to secure. "The fact is," the President declared, that our Union "rests upon public opinion, and can never be cemented by the blood of its citizens shed in civil war." Even Congress, he insisted, lacked this power: "Congress possesses many means of preserving it by conciliation, but the sword was

not placed in their hand to preserve it by force." Not for the first - or last - time during the secession crisis, the President was imprisoned by the past and by Democratic party ideology.[17]

Whilst formulating his policy on the question of secession Buchanan hoped that the processes of compromise would operate. Indeed throughout the period between Lincoln's election and the new president's inauguration, he continued to hope that a solution might be found. At this time there were a number of compromise schemes being considered but the one from which most was expected was that engineered by Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky. The Crittenden Compromise proposed a new constitutional amendment to protect slavery in the states where it already existed. It also (in its finally amended form) explicitly forbade slavery North of 36° 30' and introduced a slave code for all territories south of that line, whether already in existence or to be acquired in the future. In addition it denied the power of the Federal government to abolish slavery in federal forts and dockyards and in the District of Columbia, and it guaranteed compensation to slaveholders who could not recover fugitive slaves. The Federal government was not to obstruct the movement of slaves over state lines. Finally it stipulated that these clauses were to be incorporated as constitutional amendments and were themselves to be unamendable.

At the heart of Crittenden's package of measures was the proposal that the Missouri Compromise line at 36° 30' should be revived. This approach was eminently satisfactory to Buchanan, who, as we have seen, had supported a slave code during the recent election. Unfortunately, however, it was utterly unacceptable to most Republicans, including Lincoln, on the grounds that it would result, they feared, in a never-ending series of southern demands for territory in Latin America.

Buchanan himself played little part in the negotiations and deliberation that took place in these weeks and months. Although he favoured the calling of a convention, he insisted that the responsibility for a settlement lay with Congress rather than the executive. As time passed, however, it became increasingly apparent that a meaningful compromise would prove extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

IV

If the President remained aloof from the attempts to broker a compromise settlement in 1860-1861 he was heavily involved, until replaced by Lincoln in the White House, in all the manoeuvring and the negotiations associated with the defence of the Federal forts located in the South. As we have seen, the President had already been advised to reinforce them and, as we have also noted, he had been tempted to accept this advice. Here indeed was a dilemma for Buchanan, indeed for all northerners at this time. Sending reinforcements would undoubtedly be construed as a hostile and aggressive act in the South; allowing the forts to be lost by refusing to strengthen them, would undoubtedly be construed as a humiliating capitulation by large swathes of northerners. Throughout the remaining months of his presidency Buchanan, not surprisingly, found himself unable to escape from the horns of this dilemma.

By early December Buchanan had concluded that attempts to strengthen the forts would not only risk provoking the South into secession, but would simultaneously undermine the attempts that were being made, especially in Congress, to achieve a workable and enduring compromise. This forbearance, however, incurred the wrath of Secretary of State Cass who now resigned in protest. It is a measure of the difficulties that Buchanan faced that at the same time Howell Cobb

also resigned, in order to proceed with the secessionist agenda in Georgia. But if the President was unable to keep the loyalty of the secessionists, he was still more unpopular with northerners. Cass's resignation, even though he subsequently tried to withdraw it, fuelled an explosion of anger in the North, where Buchanan was seen as feeble and pusillanimous in comparison with his Secretary of State. Once again, on December 12 General Scott urged the reinforcement of the forts; once again the President declined the advice.

A little more than a week later, on December 20, South Carolina formally seceded from the Union. The result was a major alteration in the political landscape in that it was now up to each and every state of the South to examine not merely the case for secession, but also the Federal government's reaction to it. In other words secession had become not merely a theoretical possibility but an actuality. More specifically the Federal forts, and especially the forts located at Charleston, South Carolina became objects of the most intense interest and scrutiny on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.

The Federal forces at Fort Moultrie outside Charleston harbour were under the command of Major Robert Anderson, a Virginian by birth, but one who opposed secession. Anderson informed his superiors that his position would be impossible to defend if the South Carolinians, now proclaiming their separate nationality, occupied neighbouring Fort Sumter. But Sumter, according to Anderson, would be far easier to defend and to reinforce. Secretary of War John Floyd, another Virginian, now sent word to Anderson - and the policy was confirmed by the President on December 21 - that troops would not be sent to him, but that if he were attacked or had good reason to fear an attack he was to defend himself. Anderson was specifically authorised to transfer his garrison to Sumter should he deem it necessary. On December 26,

believing that he had such evidence, Anderson did exactly that. He thus won the acclaim of the northern public, who, rather unfairly perhaps, contrasted his heroism with the President's pusillanimity. This, however, was not the President's only problem: South Carolinians, and southern secessionists generally, now demanded that Buchanan order Anderson out of Sumter. What was the hapless President to do?

At this point Buchanan met with three commissioners from South Carolina who explicitly called for a Federal withdrawal from Sumter. For Buchanan the problem was further aggravated as a result of a genuine misunderstanding by which the South Carolinians believed, sincerely but wrongly, that a promise had previously been given them to the effect that Sumter would not be fortified. Buchanan once again consulted his cabinet, only to find, once again, that it was hopelessly split. Thompson, Floyd and Philip Thomas (who had replaced Cobb as Secretary of the Treasury) urged withdrawal from Sumter, whereas Jeremiah Black, upon whom Buchanan probably relied more than anyone, took a diametrically opposed view.

The President explained his position in a letter to the South Carolina. commissioners in which he explained that "his first promptings" were to command Anderson "to return to his former position." But before this could be ordered, South Carolina had taken Fort Moultrie (as well as Castle Pinckney, also located at Charleston). Under those circumstances, evacuation of Sumter would have meant a total surrender of the Federal forts at Charleston and this, the President announced, he would not consent to. Buchanan now stated unequivocally that it was his duty to defend Federal property and Federal troops against any seceding state.[18]

What was still unclear, however, was whether Buchanan would reinforce or re-provision these Federal outposts. Sumter now became the focus of attention. By now it had acquired enormous symbolic value. South Carolinians and secessionists

generally argued that it was an affront to South Carolina's sovereignty to allow a separate and seemingly hostile nation to maintain a force within her borders (or territorial waters). Northerners, on the other hand, although they recognised that Sumter was of negligible importance militarily and probably could not, in any event, be successfully defended against a determined assault, viewed the fort as no less than a symbol of American nationhood. It represented the Union itself.

When Buchanan refused to order Anderson out of Sumter, his Cabinet finally split into two. Buchanan now reorganised it, to the advantage of the unionist contingent. Into the War Department to replace Floyd[19] came Joseph Holt of Kentucky, a determined unionist, and to replace Thomas the President appointed John A. Dix of New York, whose unionist credentials were equally impeccable. This signalled a major shift in administration policy. No longer was the President viewed with sympathy by southern militants. Moreover, Buchanan now took a momentous decision, one that would inflict even more damage on his popularity in the South; he would send reinforcements to Anderson at Fort Sumter.

This newly found decisiveness was of short duration. Following Winfield Scott's advice, Buchanan arranged for a ship, the *Star of the West*, to set sail from New York for Charleston on January 5 1861. The *Star* carried several hundred Union soldiers and sufficient provisions, it was believed, to allow Anderson to hold out for an additional six months. This certainly was an enormously critical decision since it risked an outbreak of hostilities at Charleston. Indeed it risked the outbreak of civil war. But the entire episode acquired a farcical character, partly because of Buchanan's ineptitude, partly because of events outside his control. In the first place neither Anderson nor the South Carolinians were formally told of the decision to reinforce Sumter. But while Anderson remained in the dark, southerners at

Washington informed the South Carolinians, an outcome exactly the opposite of what military success might have required. Then, a few hours after the ship had left New York, Buchanan heard that Anderson did not in fact need reinforcements. He also heard that the South Carolinians had constructed a defensive battery at the mouth of Charleston Harbor. The *Star of the West*, moreover, was entirely unsuited for service as a warship. Buchanan now sought to rescind the order and recall her to New York. It was too late. The *Star* reached Charleston on January 9 and was met with a barrage from the newly constructed battery. The ship had little choice but to turn tail and flee. There was no loss of life but the national flag had been fired upon.

A vigorous response from the President, such as Lincoln would display the following April, would surely have plunged the nation into civil war. Northern public opinion was now at fever pitch. Buchanan had, for once, earned some plaudits for refusing to relinquish the forts and for his Cabinet reshuffle. Anderson remained a hero in the North and Buchanan, had he decided to retaliate against South Carolina, would certainly have been, for a time at least, another. But understandably fearful of precipitating a civil war and, perhaps, retaining a residual sympathy with the South, Buchanan did no such thing. There was no response from the administration, much to the disgust of millions of northerners. The national flag had been dishonoured, the nation humiliated.

Buchanan did not, however, swing to the opposite extreme and agree to hand Sumter over. On the contrary he avowed himself determined to defend the Fort against any aggressive act on the part of the South Carolinians. But nor would he initiate a military conflict: this, he claimed, was not even within his constitutional power. Meanwhile Anderson continued, throughout January and February to deny

the need for reinforcements or additional provisions. But Buchanan made it clear that he did have reinforcements ready should they be required.[20]

The President's policy was scarcely a success. Time did not produce the results he had anticipated. A meaningful compromise remained as elusive as ever. By the end of January five more states had left the Union: Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia and Louisiana. Texas would follow on March 2, just prior to Buchanan's departure from the White House. In the meantime federal authority had broken down in the seceding states and they were instead hastening to establish the Confederate States of America, much to Buchanan's dismay and the mounting anger of many northerners.

In its final weeks, the administration's policy towards Fort Sumter was straightforward: there would be no surrender of the Fort but reinforcements would be sent if, and only if, requested by Anderson. Meanwhile nothing would be done to provoke the seceding states and nothing would be done that might induce the slave states of the Middle and Border South to join the Confederacy.

Here Buchanan's presidency might have rested. But there was to be a sting in the tail. On March 3 and March 4, the last day of the old administration and the first of the new, messages arrived from Anderson at Sumter which contained some alarming news: Anderson now announced that he would require at least 20,000 men to overcome the forces that might, he feared, be ranged against him at Charleston, a force far greater than any that the administration had readily available. The following day came the even more startling revelation that Anderson had only twenty eight days of supplies remaining. But Buchanan was out of office by this time. He had bequeathed the entire problem to his successor.

The final events of the secession crisis occurred, of course, when James Buchanan was in retirement. Lincoln's decision to send additional provisions (but not troops) to Sumter, resulted in the South Carolinians firing what proved to be the first real shots of the Civil War. When Lincoln reacted in a way antithetical to Buchanan's response (or non-response) to the *Star of the West* incident, and called for volunteers to put down the rebellion, four more states (Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee and North Carolina) formally seceded. The war was now on in earnest. The firing on the flag once again produced a wave of patriotic fever throughout the North. This time even Buchanan fell into line and gave the war his full support. Even at this time, however, his pro-southern prejudices were not entirely absent: in common with many other Democrats in the North he would oppose the Emancipation Proclamation when it was issued. Like them, he would support a war to maintain the Union but had deep reservations about freeing the slaves. The legacy of the antebellum Democratic party was still in evidence.[21]

V

How then should Buchanan's performance during the secession crisis be assessed? Initially his pro-southern orientation betrayed his utter lack of understanding of the slavery question. His failure was here almost total. Slavery raised the most profound questions about government and society, morality and economy, not merely in the South but throughout the United States. Yet Buchanan could see no cause for conflict or even real controversy. Here, however, he was merely echoing the views of the great majority of those in his party in the northern states. What they all failed to understand was that slavery and the enormous material interest that supported it had had a profound impact upon the way they viewed the world. That material interest

and the ideology upon which it was inscribed, had served to blind them to dangers that other northerners were acutely aware of. It was partly for this reason that Democrats, from Buchanan and Douglas downwards, were unable to chart a course through, or even decisively influence events during, the secession crisis.

In a different way Buchanan can be criticised for his management of the crisis. For most of the four months between Lincoln's election and his inauguration he was essentially passive. At the centre of his strategy lay the belief that time was on his and the Union's side. As long as he did nothing to precipitate armed conflict, there would be time for the forces of compromise to stage a triumphant rally. This too betrayed a lack of understanding.

Buchanan's passivity was replaced by a genuine activism only once. When he ordered the *Star of the West* to Charleston, the President was seeking to shape rather than merely react to events. But, as we have seen, no sooner had he taken this decision than he sought to revoke it. Moreover, when the *Star* was fired upon, Buchanan had no policy to offer and immediately lost the unwonted popularity he had briefly enjoyed in the North.

It is one thing, however, to find fault with Buchanan's conduct in these weeks and months and quite another to identify a leader who did appreciably better. Many historians have compared Buchanan with Lincoln and almost all of them have come down strongly in favour of the President-elect. This is an understandable conclusion. When Lincoln sent provisions to Anderson he, unlike Buchanan was careful first to inform Anderson, second to inform the South Carolinians and third to ensure that only provisions, rather than military reinforcements, were sent. These differences were significant. They made it much easier for Lincoln to claim that southerners were the aggressors than it would have been for Buchanan three months earlier.[22]

On the other hand, Buchanan showed greater understanding of the South than Lincoln. Almost until it actually happened, Lincoln, in common with many other Republicans, believed that secession was an idle threat. This was, in part because, again like many other Republicans, he grossly overestimated the extent and depth of Unionist sentiment in the South. If Buchanan was blind to the slavery question Lincoln was, from the party's inception, blind to the threat that the Republicans posed to the South and, in this sense, to the continued existence of the Union.

Beyond these considerations, however, one must ask how important Buchanan's conduct was in these months. Did he make secession more or less likely? Did his actions increase or reduce the number of states that would secede? Much of the time, as we have seen, he did relatively little: there was not much for the southern states to react to, for good or for ill. But it has been argued that his decision to send the *Star of the West* to Charleston in the attempt to reinforce Sumter, tipped some of the States of the Deep South, like Georgia and Louisiana over the edge. Here, it is claimed, the majorities for secession were extremely small so that, futile and botched though the initiative was, it may well have inclined a critical number of otherwise loyal southerners towards disunion.[23]

This interpretation, however, almost certainly misconstrues the thinking of those whom it classifies as unionist in sentiment and thus overestimates the impact of Buchanan's action. In fact there was little true unionism in the Deep South. A high proportion of those who were opposed to immediate secession favored an ultimatum to the North. Either Lincoln would retreat from the platform on which he had been elected, and specifically from his opposition to the future creation of new slave states, or secession would take place. These southerners in turn misconstrued Republican sentiment. Having come into existence as a party with the express purpose of

checking the aggressions of the "Slave Power," Republicans were now being asked, at the very moment of triumph, to make the most humiliating surrender of their principles to that very power. A few conservatives within the party were willing to contemplate this retreat but it was rejected even by a moderate like Lincoln. As a result many of the so-called unionists in the South were in reality secessionists, whether they knew it or not, since they advocated an ultimatum to the Republicans that was certain to be rejected. Thus the scope for Buchanan to influence opinion decisively was extremely limited. Most southerners, when they discussed the President at all, usually recognised that he was a lame duck whose power was ebbing. Almost everyone recognised that the key decisions and actions would be taken by his successor in the White House.[24]

The final verdict on Buchanan must depend on the criteria used. If he is judged by absolute standards, his failure to appreciate the contentiousness of the slavery question must weigh heavily against him. But it is a sad fact that others, like Lincoln and indeed the southerners who embarked upon secession (thinking either that would be no war or that it would result in a swift and overwhelming Confederate triumph) were guilty of equally significant errors and misperceptions.

This is not to say, however, that Buchanan was part of a "blundering generation" who can be blamed for failing to avert a "needless war." Although there were blunders or at least errors and misperceptions, the vital ones were not the product of individual shortcomings. As we have seen, many of Buchanan's mistakes and misunderstandings were typical of northern Democrats generally. Like the other mistakes and misunderstandings made at the time by both Republicans and secessionists, they deeply rooted in a specific ideology or world-views. And those

ideologies themselves sprang from the material conditions under which millions of Americans lived their lives.[25]

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[1] On Buchanan's career prior to 1860 see, in addition to the other chapters in this volume, Jean H. Baker, *James Buchanan*.(New York, 2004); Frederick Moore Binder, *James Buchanan and the American Empire.* (Selinsgrove, Pa., 1994); Michael J. Birkner (ed.), *James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s* (Selinsgrove, Pa., 1996); Philip S Klein, *President James Buchanan: A Biography* (1962); David Meerse, "Buchanan, the Patronage, and the Lecompton Constitution: a Case Study" *Civil War History* (1995) 41: 291–312; Roy Franklin Nichols, *The Democratic Machine, 1850–1854* (New York, 1923); Elbert B. Smith, *The Presidency of James Buchanan* (Lawrence, Ka., 1975).

[2] This is, of course, the "revisionist" interpretation of the Civil War. See, for example, Avery Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War* (Chicago, 1957).

[3] The arguments contained in this paragraph are more fully developed in John Ashworth *Slavery, Capitalism and Politics in the Antebellum Republic* 2 vols (New York, 1995, 2007).

[4] No scholar has done more to emphasise this vital point than Joel Silbey. See his *The Shrine of Party: Congressional Voting Behavior, 1841-1852* (Pittsburgh, 1967) and *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War* (New York, 1985).

[5] Buchanan to Charles Kessler *et al*, 25 Aug 1847 in John More (ed.), *The Works of James Buchanan* 12 volumes (Philadelphia, 1908 - 11), VII, p. 386. See also *ibid*, VIII, 356, 434.

[6] A minority of Democrats espoused a (usually qualified) antislavery. I shall not consider them here but have discussed their views in *Slavery, Capitalism and Politics*, II: *The Coming of the Civil War*, pp. 176-205.

[7] *Works of Buchanan*, IX, pp. 82-83, 106, 225,.

[8] Critics of the South observed at the time (and historians subsequently) that a Federal slave code was at odds with the southern insistence upon states' rights.

[9] See Smith, *Presidency of Buchanan*, pp. 124-125.

[10] For most (though not all) of the period between 1796 and 1860 the Democrats (including their Jeffersonian forebears) achieved a disproportionate amount of support from the South. This was no coincidence.

[11] Useful accounts of the events of these months can be found in Daniel Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill, 1989); Harold Holzer, *Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter 1860-1861* (New York,

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[12] It is probably fair to say that historians have given Buchanan too little credit here.

[13] Stampp, *And the War Came*, p. 51-53; Philip G. Auchampaugh, *James Buchanan and his Cabinet on the Eve of Secession* (Lancaster, Pa., 1926).

[14] The annual message may be found in *Works of Buchanan,* XI, pp. 7-54.

[15] Republicans commonly argued, for example, that all Americans would benefit from having the territories available as a safety valve for northern workers who would be able to emigrate to a free-soil West and that slaveholders' control of territories and states threatened northerners' civil and political freedoms.

[16] William Seward to Francis Seward, December 5, 1860 in Frederick W. Seward, *Seward at Washington as Senator and Secretary of State* 2 vols (New York, 1891), II, p. 480.
[17] *Works of Buchanan,* XI, p. 20.

[18] Buchanan to the South Carolina Commissioners, Dec. 31, 1860 in *Works of Buchanan,* XI, p. 83.

[19] Floyd's War Department was beset by financial irregularities and corrupt activities which served only to increase the administration's problems.

[20] See *Works of Buchanan*, XI, p.172 for the President's own (largely accurate) summary of his policy.

[21] *Works of Buchanan*, XI, pp. 181, 187; Klein, *President James Buchanan,* p. 421.

[22] This is not to say that Lincoln wanted a war, rather that, if war were to come, he wanted the southerners to be, and to appear to be, the aggressors.

[23] This is the view of William W. Freehling. See Freehling, *Road to Disunion* vol 2: *Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861* (New York, 2007).

[24] These points are made at greater length in my *Slavery, Capitalism and Politics,* II: *The Coming of the Civil War.*

[25] For a discussion of the ways in which Republican misperceptions influenced events and were themselves the product of northern social conditions see my *Slavery, Capitalism and Politics,* II: *The Coming of the Civil War*, pp. 173-336.