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Abstract
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Outside his hometown, his name does not much register with Americans today. When it does, the reaction is usually negative. What a comedown from the high hopes associated with Old Buck's election to the presidency in 1856.

Dating the start of the downhill slide for Buchanan's historical reputation is not difficult. The firing on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, turned an uncomfortable breakup of the Union into a Civil War. "Buchanan's War," some called it, believing his bungling had a lot to do with the crisis Abraham Lincoln inherited and worked so hard to resolve.

Buchanan had not counted on civil war, believing he had done his best to prevent it. He had offered time for his successor to maneuver and possibly to cut a deal for a new constitutional amendment to assure slavery's protection where it stood, in perpetuity. That, he thought, might end the unpleasantness before it turned really ugly.

Buchanan wasn't back in Lancaster for more than a week before he began attending church services and visiting old haunts, including the Grapes Tavern in old town. But with the firing on Sumter, he noticed dirty looks and negative mutterings wherever he went. Consequently, Buchanan retreated to Wheatland, where he would closely monitor the progress of the war and commence the task of defending his controversial performance as president.

Buchanan's defense was published early in 1866. It sold reasonably well but did not win many converts to the notion that his stewardship had been good for the country. In the view of most historians, Buchanan was a weak and vacillating figure, lacking Lincoln's eloquence and Andrew Jackson's character when faced by a challenge from South Carolina firebrands.

Harvard University's Samuel Eliot Morison captured the general tenor of scholarly opinion in his generation when he observed, in the Oxford History of the American People, "Poor, foolish Buchanan! He prayed and twittered and did nothing" during the secession crisis.

Buchanan, Henry Steele Commager added, was "by universal consent the worst president in the history of the country"— an opinion shared by no less an authority than Princeton University's James McPherson.

Is there no refreshing the brand?

The short answer is yes. The trick is to avoid defending the indefensible and to pay attention to elements of Buchanan's conduct of office little noted in textbooks or popular literature on presidents.

On the occasion of Buchanan's 224th birthday, let us consider what cannot be defended — and what is worth putting into the mix in evaluating this canny politician who held the right office at the wrong time.

The indefensible:

— Meddling in Supreme Court deliberations over the Dred Scott case and, further, asserting that a decision that made slavery national would somehow "solve" the sectional crisis.

— Patronage dispensation, which punished Stephen Douglas' adherents for no good reason except spite.

— Kansas policy, which, by insisting that a minority pro-slavery constitution was necessary for its admission to the Union, tore Buchanan's beloved Democratic Party apart and opened the door to a Republican victory in 1860.

The standard wisdom on all three subjects convicts Buchanan of misfeasance if not incompetence during his tenure in the White House.

If that and the more complex matter of Buchanan's handling of the secession crisis were all that there was to say about his presidency, a more textured view of the 15th president's tenure could never emerge.

Buchanan's presidency was mainly, though not entirely, defined by his blunders. Yet he was adept in certain affairs. Among these matters, Buchanan deserves credit for the following:

— Repressing the slave trade and prosecuting pro-slavery adventurers in Latin America, the so-called filibusters.

— Forging strong ties with the world's then super-power, Great Britain.

— Removing a rogue leader of the Utah Territory, Brigham Young, from the governorship there and commencing Utah's more "normal" integration into the Union.

— Giving Congress and incoming President Abraham Lincoln the opportunity to pursue an agreement on slavery, short of war, with the secessionists. (That proved impossible in view of Lincoln's refusal to compromise on the issue of slavery's expansion into the west.)

James Buchanan will never be ranked among the nation's more popular or successful presidents. Even his warmest local adherents will concede that he will always inhabit the basement in presidential rankings, albeit joined there by other presidents who did not live up to their billing or potential.

There is something more upbeat to consider about Buchanan's turbulent years in the White House: all the work he has provided for generations of historians to investigate and to argue what went right and what went wrong during his presidency. At the very least, we are in the Old Public Functionary's debt for that.

Michael J. Birkner is professor of history at Gettysburg College and a member of the board of Lancasterhistory.org. He is co-editor, with John W. Quist, of "James Buchanan and the Coming of the Civil War" (University Press of Florida, 2013).

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