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The Worlds of James Buchanan and Thaddeus Stevens: Place, Personality and Politics in Civil War America

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The Worlds of James Buchanan and Thaddeus Stevens: Place, Personality and Politics in Civil War America

Description

The Worlds of James Buchanan and Thaddeus Stevens examines the political interests, relationships, and practices of two of the era's most prominent politicians as well as the political worlds they inhabited and informed. Building upon previous scholarship on James Buchanan and Thaddeus Stevens, the contributors track their personal connections across lines of gender and geography and underline the importance of elementary facts of political association—such as with whom one ate and conversed on a regular basis, the complex social milieu of Washington, and the role of rumor—in determining relationships and political allegiances. The essays in this volume collectively invite further consideration of how parties, personality, place, and private lives influenced the political interests and actions of an age affected by race, religion, region, and civil war.

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1850s politics, James Buchanan, Thaddeus Stevens, Stephen A. Douglas, Gender and Politics

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Comments

This book's introduction is available to download.

**THE WORLDS OF
JAMES BUCHANAN
AND
THADDEUS STEVENS**

PLACE, PERSONALITY, AND POLITICS
IN THE CIVIL WAR ERA

EDITED BY

MICHAEL J. BIRKNER, RANDALL M. MILLER,
AND JOHN W. QUIST

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INTRODUCTION

One of the persistent problems in studying the Civil War era is sorting out and determining the extent to which combinations of principles, partisanship, and personalities directed and drove the politics of the age. Historians have emphasized one factor over others in trying to understand the coming apart of the old party system, the coming together of a new party, and the coming of the war, and then the consequences of that struggle in shaping postwar politics. The recent spate of biographies of prominent figures—not only, and of course, Abraham Lincoln, but also Stephen A. Douglas, Frederick Douglass, William H. Seward, Edwin M. Stanton, and Ulysses S. Grant, among others—has shed light especially on northerners and the political worlds they inhabited. Other major works tracking the history of political parties have pointed more to ideology and partisan interest than personality as the critical forces informing political issues and loyalties. Whatever the emphasis or mix, historians still debate how, why, and with what effect such elements made the politics of the age so unstable and made possible new political coalitions.

At the same time, historians have been increasingly attentive to the varieties and vagaries of political loyalties based on place. Whatever the discipline of party systems, locality counted in deciding on which issues and interests to press. New England Democrats, Whigs, and Republicans had different styles and priorities than their border-state counterparts, for example. Some of that was a difference in culture and economy, some a matter of proximities, such as the distance from “the South” physically and socially. Recent scholarship on border-state politics has shown that proximity

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mattered, whether in family and commercial ties that mitigated sectional differences or in borders between “free” and “slave” states that exacerbated them, especially regarding the issue of fugitive slaves.

The *Worlds of James Buchanan and Thaddeus Stevens* takes up such questions and concerns by focusing on two of the nation’s most prominent politicians and the political and social worlds they occupied, affected, and sometimes imagined. Both men were from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where they had gained success in business pursuits and had been weaned on border-state politics, and bachelors, which affected their social rootedness. Both were successful lawyers before entering politics and had lives that spanned identical decades: Buchanan was born in 1791, less than a year before Stevens, and Stevens died in 1868, less than three months after Buchanan. Yet they diverged dramatically in ideology, interest, and personality to the extent that place seemed hardly to matter in explaining their character, concerns, and conduct. At the same time, both men regarded Lancaster County as their “home” even as they lived elsewhere, especially in Washington, where separate social circles and national political issues kept them apart. By the 1850s, Buchanan was in many ways “the old public functionary,” looking backward in trying to keep alive the Jacksonian Democracy he had done much to build as the slavery issue tore at the party systems, while Stevens was the forward-looking Whig-turned- Republican, willing to invest the federal government with new powers for economic development and social reform, especially antislavery, and then later for Republican Reconstruction. Buchanan’s border-state experiences and, more so, his lifelong loyalty to the Democratic Party drew him to southerners as friends and allies; his political fortunes rose and fell with southern Democrats. Stevens’s border-state experiences drew him to Whiggish ideas about an active government promoting economic growth and development and to righting the wrong of slavery, which to his mind was both a moral outrage and a drag on progress. Buchanan’s and Stevens’s lives mirrored those of many others of their day and place. Considering their lives and their political and social worlds thus offers an opportunity to discover the dynamics and directions of American politics, especially northern interests and identities. It is the subject of this book.

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Left: James Buchanan (1791-1868). Sketch by unknown artist, drawn February 16, 1866, at Buchanan's home, Wheatland, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Courtesy LancasterHistory.org, Lancaster PA.

Right: Thaddeus Stevens (1792-1868). Painting by unknown artist, ca. 1867. Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC.

Several themes run through this volume. One is the importance of personal relationships and personality in reflecting and affecting political ideas and allegiances. Any student of politics understands that equation, but the essays herein track the personal connections across lines of gender and geography and point to a new appreciation for elementary, though essential, facts of political association: for example, with whom one ate and conversed on a regular basis, the social isolation of Washington, and the role of rumor in defining, and undermining, relationships and political loyalties. Much has been written on the petticoat politics of the capital, but much less is known about the world of men without women, whether as husbands away from their wives at home while serving in Washington or as bachelors living in separate quarters with other men. At the same time, the predominance of men in the capital has obscured the ways women influenced political interests, in part through close malefemale friendships that allowed them a political voice beyond their own families.

Another theme is the constancy of a westward vision, even compulsion,

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driving a politics of Manifest Destiny for Democrats, Whigs, and Republicans alike that persisted from the antebellum period through Reconstruction. No party had a monopoly on wanting the West. Whether illusion or delusion, the West promised renewal and reward. It was worth fighting for and fighting over, and men did just that. That story is well known, but several essays in this book suggest a dynamics of westward thrust that went beyond partisan interest and cast both Buchanan and Stevens as westward directed in their politics. Both men and their respective political friends, regardless of party, insisted on asserting federal power to secure the West. Yet on land issues, in both the West and the South, principle, partisanship, and personality mattered. When race factored into thinking about who should gain land and what protections the government would provide for them, it proved a combustible mix that disrupted politics and destroyed political friendships.

Yet another theme is the instability of national political institutions caused by the aggressive expansionism of the era; the convulsions of the slavery controversy; the antiparty attitudes coming from radicals of various religious, reform, and regional interests; the self-serving politics of ambitious chieftains; and the social and psychological strains of failing relationships. Here, too, personality counted. For example, the clashing ambitions and egos of Buchanan and Douglas did much to hasten the coming apart of the Democratic Party. And Buchanan's difficulties with erstwhile political "friends" who were disappointed when the rewards fell short of what they thought was their due revealed a stubbornness on all sides that hardened rivalries within the party.

All that said, such instability did not create a new politics, as some historians have argued. However much the collapse of the so-called Second Party System and the rise of the Republican Party in the 1850s reordered political identities, writing an epitaph for the old politics altogether misses the continued vitality and centrality of parties as the principal means of organizing and directing political loyalty and behavior. The sectional politics that subsumed everything else at the national level did not drive away older interests and issues that informed politics at the local level or create new methods of party discipline or electioneering. New party labels and coalitions did not necessarily lead to the abandonment of

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old allegiances and relationships. Indeed, close examinations of politics at the state level reveal examples of state and local party organizations able to

sustain loyalties enough through habit, patronage, and social compatibility to win elections and continue to reward friends and followers. Any new politics of ideology could not survive long without attention to the old politics of personal association and reward and disciplined organizing from the local level upward.

Such themes and concerns as noted above do not encompass all that informed and shaped the worlds of Buchanan, Stevens, and their contemporaries. The essays in this book compose no comprehensive overview of the politics and personalities of the Civil War era, nor do they suggest that an emphasis on parties, personality, place, and private lives can explain the political interests and actions of the age—hardly so, when factors of race, religion, and region loomed large and when a civil war almost turned politics inside out. But collectively, they do invite further consideration of such factors as being at least influential and sometimes decisive.