

## JAMES BUCHANAN: ROMANCING THE UNION

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James Buchanan is widely recognized as one of our worst presidents. Indeed, he is ranked at the very bottom in a 1994 survey sponsored by the Siena Research Institute, a 1997 study by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, a survey of historians that accompanied C-SPAN's 1999 series *American Presidents: Life Portraits*, an accompanying survey of C-SPAN viewers, and an October 2000 survey of seventy-eight scholars of history, political science, and law, cosponsored by the Federalist Society and the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>1</sup> In their 1997 book, *Rating the Presidents*, William J. Ridings Jr. and Stuart B. McIver elevate Buchanan to forty, out of forty-one, just ahead of Harding, but also note that "Buchanan is one of the most maligned of all the presidents."<sup>2</sup> Charles and Richard Faber, in their *The American Presidents Ranked by Performance*, published in 2000, give Buchanan the highest marks I was able to find, setting him at number twenty-five, based primarily on his three-way tie for third with George Washington and Harry Truman in the area of foreign relations.<sup>3</sup>

These survey results are reinforced by the opinions of scholars. Michael J. Birkner, for example, opens his introduction to an edited volume called *James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s*, by noting that "Buchanan is perhaps best remembered, or misremembered, as the weak-kneed, dough-faced president who allowed the South to break up the Union." A few pages later, he suggests that while "it is extreme to call Buchanan . . .

American's worst president, it is true that little went right and much went wrong for President Buchanan, and that many of his troubles he brought on himself." And among those troubles, apparently, was the fact that, as Birkner puts it, "Politically speaking, Buchanan's presidency was a disaster."<sup>4</sup> William E. Gienapp notes that "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."<sup>5</sup> Robert E. May reflects that "When it comes to ratings of American chief executives, President James Buchanan occupies a lowly rank." May acknowledges that "there are dissenting voices such as that of biographer Philip Shriver Klein," but that "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."<sup>6</sup> Allan Nevins notes that "No President ever faced a more difficult task" than did James Buchanan—and also that "None . . . ever faced a terrible crisis with feebler means of dealing with it effectively."<sup>7</sup>

Of course, no small part of Buchanan's troubles stem from the fact that it was his unfortunate fate to preside over national disintegration. It would be a remarkably strong character indeed who could snatch a glowing legacy from the jaws of such an epic disaster. Some (like Allan Nevins) think that Buchanan contributed to the onset of the Civil War; others (like Klein, his most sympathetic biographer) think that Buchanan might actually have helped to delay it. John Updike, who has taken James Buchanan as the subject of one full-length play (as far as I know, never produced) and one novel (actually not about James Buchanan, but about a guy who is trying to write a book about James Buchanan while having an affair with his neighbor's wife), gives him perhaps the fairest assessment: "Elected amid rising sectionalism to keep the peace for four more years, he performed the job for which he was hired."<sup>8</sup> Probably all of these assessments are partly correct; they are not mutually exclusive, at any rate.

It is not my main purpose in this essay to contribute directly to this debate, but rather to suggest that Buchanan's particular failures as a president were a function of his rhetoric. I begin by reviewing some of the historical assessments of Buchanan's presidential oratory. I then suggest a modification of Jeffrey K. Tulis's conception of "rhetoric" to allow a more nuanced assessment of Buchanan's discourse. Specifically, I suggest that Buchanan *romanced* the Union, placing it upon an unapproachable pedestal and thus rendering it impervious to rhetorical engagement. In doing so, Buchanan both failed to intervene in the escalating sectional conflict and failed to supply his auditors

with adequate rhetorical means through which to apprehend and address the national crisis.

### RHETORICAL ASSESSMENTS

Evaluations of Buchanan's eloquence, perhaps not surprisingly, mirror assessments of his presidency. Gienapp notes, for example, that Buchanan was "adept at using his voluminous private correspondence to gain support" but "never displayed particular talent as a public speaker or literary stylist," lacking "the ability to elevate his thought out of the ordinary channels." "He produced no ringing documents defending his administration's policies," Gienapp continues, "and indeed, in four decades of public service, never coined a memorable phrase or voiced a memorable statement."<sup>9</sup> Roy Franklin Nichols, similarly, notes that Buchanan "was no orator, nor had he talent with words."<sup>10</sup> And even John Updike affirms that during Buchanan's Senate tenure, "though his intellectual powers must have been then in their prime, he was not known to deliver a single speech remarkable either for eloquence, for potential reasoning, or for valuable practical illustration. He was notably deficient both in ingenuity and in rhetorical brilliancy."<sup>11</sup> Updike goes on to say of John Bassett Moore's twelve-volume *Works of James Buchanan* that "Only in an eternal Hell could one read through this shelf of congressional speeches, diplomatic dispatches, Presidential papers, and letters political and personal."<sup>12</sup> For the most part, these materials exhibit a sort of scorecard or accounting-book rhetoric, in which long lists of causes and effects are ticked off in a rather precise, dull, and tedious style.

Some historians explicitly emphasize the connection between Buchanan's weaknesses as a president and his weaknesses as a rhetorician. Nevins, for example, critiques Buchanan's second annual message to Congress in 1858, delivered as secessionist fever was continuing to build, and argues that "Had Buchanan possessed more imagination, energy, and elevation of outlook, he might have used them to divert the nation's attention from jarring quarrels to constructive tasks."<sup>13</sup> He recommends that Buchanan, immediately after Lincoln's election, "should have lost no time . . .—not a day, not an hour—in preparing as eloquent and spirited an appeal to national sentiment, North and South, as he and his aides could pen."<sup>14</sup> But Updike, coming to Buchanan's defense, quite rightly questions the validity of such critiques, wondering "how real this possibility was, in an age accustomed to a narrowly executive Presidency, before the electronic communications that made it possible for,

say, a Franklin Roosevelt to rise high above the governmental machinery of Washington."<sup>15</sup>

Updike thus foreshadows Tulis's argument that the "rhetorical presidency and the understanding of American politics that it signifies are twentieth-century inventions and discoveries," though Tulis warns that it would be a mistake to account for the rise of the rhetorical presidency merely as a technological effect.<sup>16</sup> The advent of the rhetorical presidency represents, instead, Tulis argues, a fundamental shift in conceptions about what it means to govern. Specifically, Tulis argues that the twentieth-century "rhetorical presidency" suspends the president between two *constitutions*, one consisting of the "core structures established in 1789 and debated during the founding era," and the other consisting of the "contemporary presidential and public understanding of the character of the constitutional system and of the president's place in it."<sup>17</sup> The "core structures" that characterized the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century presidents, as Tulis describes them, include: protections against demagoguery, the "brakes upon public opinion" inherent in representative government, an independent chief executive, and separation of the branches of government into differing areas of specialty.<sup>18</sup> This conception of the presidency constrains presidential messages within the genres of inaugural addresses, proclamations, veto messages, and annual messages to Congress—precisely the material that makes up the bulk of Moore's twelve volumes.

It would be relatively simple work to show that Buchanan viewed the presidency in these terms. Buchanan was something of an antidemagogue, a man suspicious of public opinion but otherwise seemingly uninterested in it. Gienapp, for example, argues that Buchanan "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."<sup>19</sup> And Philip Klein notes that Buchanan thought private dinners with other politicians were "a better medium for airing his views and putting them into circulation than public speeches or the effusions of a controlled press."<sup>20</sup> For example, Stephen A. Douglas's arguments against the Lecompton constitution—on the grounds that it was not the bona fide voice of popular sovereignty—left Buchanan famously unimpressed. And Buchanan consistently understood the branches of the federal government to represent entirely separate functions that should not, under threat of ensuing chaos, be mixed. In response to a missive sent by the "commissioners" from the just-seceded South Carolina, for example, who visited Buchanan in January 1861, Buchanan declared that he had "no alternative, as the chief executive

officer under the Constitution of the United States, but to collect the public revenues and to protect the public property so far as this might be practicable under existing laws. This is still my purpose. My province is to execute, and not to make, the laws. It belongs to Congress, exclusively, to repeal, to modify, or to enlarge their provisions, to meet exigencies as they may occur. I possess no dispensing power."<sup>21</sup>

### TULIS AND RHETORIC

Buchanan's conception of a severely limited presidency, together with his natural dearth of rhetorical artistry, conspire to render him a representative example of the "prerhetorical presidency." But modifying Tulis's conception of rhetoric allows a shift in focus. Specifically, I want to transfer attention away from the genres of rhetoric that Buchanan was led by his times to produce, and toward the conception of his times that might have been produced by Buchanan's rhetoric. I am not attempting to reverse a cause-and-effect relationship between text and context, but instead to understand text and context as inherently and inexorably connected and thus as two synchronic poles between which a critic might slide her or his lens.

In the introductory chapter of *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Tulis observes that "Rhetorical practice is not merely a variable, it is also an amplification or vulgarization of the ideas that produce it. Political rhetoric," he continues, "is, simultaneously, a practical result of basic doctrines of governance, and an avenue to the meaning of alternative constitutional understandings."<sup>22</sup> Ideas and doctrines, in this view, exist some place outside of rhetoric, and rhetoric itself is merely a sort of conduit through which these ideas and doctrines are passed. This is a valuable emendation and critique of the view of rhetoric as merely a symptom, but still it is an *instrumental* view of rhetoric, an understanding of communication that renders it an inert conveyance rather than an architectonic and constitutive political force. Rather than the site wherein ideas and policies are generated, rhetoric is understood as merely the conduit through which they pass on their journey from the mind of the president to the minds of his auditors.

This instrumental view of rhetoric is evident, for example, in Tulis's discussion of Lincoln's discourse of "silence" prior to his inauguration. Tulis describes five reasons that Lincoln supplied for his reluctance to speak on the key issue of the day before he was inaugurated, perhaps chief among them being an effort to direct the attention of his audience to the "carefully crafted rhetoric" that eventually he would present "officially," such as

in his inaugural address. Lincoln's discourse of silence is thus apprehended as a stratagem, a way to prepare the ground for a future deployment of policies. Tulis is persuasive. But compare Ed Black's discussion of Lincoln's efforts in his second inaugural to efface himself from his own text. Some of Black's insights regarding this instance of rhetorical silence sound remarkably similar to Tulis's. Black describes Lincoln's "deliberate self-suppression," for example, and his "disappearance from his own discourses."<sup>23</sup> But Black goes on to argue that by removing himself, Lincoln invites his audience to apprehend his speeches as the "conveyance of pure argument," uncorrupted by his own character: "Nothing, no one stands between the auditor and the experiences of the speech's progression. Lincoln is not there. He has transmuted himself into an instrument."<sup>24</sup> Black attends to this moment of silence not merely or primarily to explicate Lincoln's rhetorical strategy, nor to honor the artistry of his words, but rather to theorize their possible effects upon an audience. Black argues that Lincoln's self-suppression "so shaped his audiences that their credulity was tested only by the policies he advanced."<sup>25</sup> Such discourses "compel a reconstitution of our character as 'auditors,'" forcing upon us a "different perspective"; neither Lincoln's immediate audience, nor anyone who reads the text, "can understand the second inaugural address without somehow experiencing its perspective."<sup>26</sup> Lincoln's discourse, Black concludes, "created in his presidential discourses a mind" and invites its audience toward a sharing of that mind. It is not merely conduit or strategy, but is itself constitutive of rhetor and audience.

Stephen A. Douglas once famously reminded James Buchanan that he was no Andrew Jackson. And neither, of course, was Buchanan an Abe Lincoln. But Buchanan's rhetoric did invite its auditors toward sharing a particular perspective—perhaps toward partaking of a certain sort of communal mind. And in that sense, Buchanan's presidency most certainly was a "rhetorical" one. True, he addressed Congress far more often than he addressed the people; true, he much preferred written communication to oral; true, he was linguistically inelegant. But he was a rhetorical president, and the perspectives that his rhetoric invited its audience to share had undeniable material consequences.

### ROMANCING THE UNION

Buchanan's discourse during his presidency necessarily touches on a great many subjects. Arguably, his most important statements are those on foreign policy, as this was particularly important to him and, by some accounts, his

most significant legacy. But I shall focus on the statements pertaining to that national tragedy that contributes most directly to Buchanan's low status among our presidents, the fate of the Union during the 1850s. Buchanan's discourse romances the Union, positioning it as an uncorrupted and idealized object too fragile to be subjected to interrogation, conflict, or indeed even engagement.<sup>27</sup> The Union is not a process for Buchanan, nor even a product, but instead a lifeless and inert Platonic form not to be apprehended directly. Both horrified and seduced, Buchanan cannot engage her and yet cannot look away. Thus turned to stone, like a would-be lover after gazing upon the face of a Medusa, Buchanan dithered amid disintegration.

There exists in Buchanan's biography a Victorian tale of virtuous love and tragic separation with remarkable dramatic potential. Any understanding of Buchanan's relationship to the Union, and thus of the relationship he would foster among his hearers, must begin here. Philip G. Auchampaugh, writing in 1939, begins a two-part essay on Buchanan subtitled "An Inquiry On the Subject of Feminine Influence in the Life of our Fifteenth President," by arguing that "there are few phases of Buchanan's life more interesting than the one concerning his attitude towards women,"<sup>28</sup> and that this particular relationship seems to have been particularly formative. Klein asserts, indeed, that these events not only "changed the course of James Buchanan's life" but also "possibly the course of American history."<sup>29</sup>

Much of this story must remain forever lost to history, for Buchanan bundled all of the pertinent documents separately from his other papers, and ordered the bundle destroyed, unopened, upon his death. The basic outlines of the narrative can be reconstructed, however. The year was 1818, and James Buchanan was a twenty-seven-year-old single lawyer in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, rising rapidly from his humble beginnings in Stony Batter; he had, as Klein puts it, "a talent for making himself agreeable to families of standing in the town and for raising the hopes of their unmarried daughters." Ann Coleman was "the belle of the town and the daughter of one of the richest men in the country," but at twenty-two something of an "Old Maid" by the standards of the time.<sup>30</sup> Buchanan's law partner, Molton C. Rogers, was courting one of Ann's cousins, and invited Buchanan one evening to serve as Ann's escort. Ann and James became engaged to be married the following summer, and as Rogers and Ann's cousin had also become engaged, local gossips began to imagine a double wedding. But ominous clouds lurked about the horizon of these seemingly pleasant and mundane events. For one thing, Ann's parents were not particularly enthusiastic. Ann's father, like Buchanan's, had emigrated from Ireland, but Robert Coleman had become one

of the nation's first millionaires and was both proud and jealous of his wealth. He may have heard the whisperings about town that Buchanan was more interested in his money than in his daughter. He was a trustee of Dickinson College, from which Buchanan had once been expelled. And he also knew that Buchanan had once lost three tracts of land in a wager on an election. Together, such revelations surely did little to pad Buchanan's resume.

But this story is perhaps more tragedy than melodrama, its catastrophes the result more of bad decisions than a foreboding mood. The summer after their engagement, Buchanan's attentions were diverted by the financial crisis of 1819, which, as Klein puts it, "had developed into a nightmare for men of property and the lawyers who handled it."<sup>31</sup> Buchanan suddenly was frantically busy, and had to travel almost constantly back and forth between Lancaster and Philadelphia. The Federalist Party, with which Buchanan was affiliated, was falling apart, and the debates over the Missouri Compromise were wracking the country. Buchanan served on a committee to draft a resolution in opposition to extending slavery into Missouri, and attended numerous public meetings in which these issues were discussed and political connections were made. He did not spend much time in Lancaster, and his absence was duly noted by all concerned.

Ann penned a note to Buchanan telling him that she feared he was more interested in her money than in her. This placed Buchanan in something of a double bind, for either continuing to treat the relationship with relative coolness or suddenly showing Ann more attention would be seen as confirmation of Ann's accusations. So Buchanan did nothing. As is true so often in tragedies, this mistake quickly was followed by a fatal error. Upon returning from one of his frequent out-of-town journeys, he called first not upon Ann Coleman but upon the charming wife of Mr. William Jenkins, who happened to be entertaining her equally charming but unmarried sister, Miss Grace Hubley. Word quickly got back to Ann and when, at length, Buchanan did knock upon Ann's door, her sister answered and told him: "She is not in to you, sir."<sup>32</sup> Ann broke off the engagement, and traveled to Philadelphia to visit her sister. She left Lancaster on December 4—and died at her sister's home that night. The attending physician noted that this was the first time he had ever witnessed "hysteria" as a cause of death.<sup>33</sup>

Buchanan wrote a letter to Robert Coleman in which he said, among other things, that "My prospects are all cut off, and I feel that my happiness will be buried with her in the grave." He notes, somewhat mysteriously, that "it is now no time for explanation, but the time will come when you will discover that she, as well as I, have been much abused. God forgive the authors

of it." He says he has only "one request to make," and that is for Coleman to "afford me the melancholy pleasure of seeing her body before its interment. I would not for the world be denied this request." He then makes a second request, though the "misrepresentations which must have been made to you" made him "almost afraid" of doing so: "I would like to follow her remains to the grave as a mourner." He wishes "to convince the world, and I hope yet to convince you, that she was infinitely dearer to me than life. I may sustain the shock of her death, but I feel that happiness has fled from me forever."<sup>34</sup> Robert Coleman returned the letter to Buchanan, unopened.

How deeply must such events have affected young James Buchanan? Nichols suggests that Buchanan used the events to manufacture "a romantic legend" which he shared with others as a means of shielding himself from the truth of his loss. "Ever after," Nichols continues, "he had the ill equipped bachelor's eagerness for feminine attention to hide his peculiar lack, and he quite shone in the drawing room."<sup>35</sup> Auchampaugh, as if in agreement, notes that "it has not been difficult to see from the facts . . . that Buchanan had a strong sex impulse."<sup>36</sup> But Auchampaugh also briefly reviews a psychological theory of the day that "neural connections once formed are again called into action by later experiences." "If one accepts this idea," he suggests, "a connection can be seen with this tragedy and the one which Buchanan felt was impending in 1860–1861."<sup>37</sup> If we can take seriously Jim Jasinski's recommendation that "popular literature on the subjects of courtship, seduction, and marriage" can be read "metaphorically in order to understand better the political anxieties" of a particular historical period, how much more attractive is the possibility of reading this bizarre and cautionary tale as a metaphor for Buchanan's own political anxieties.<sup>38</sup> Just as the young lawyer Buchanan turned his attention to matters financial and political while the object of his affection drifted away, so did old President Buchanan search for procedural solutions to the problems of slavery while his priceless and idealized Union drifted toward disintegration.

Some Buchanan scholars already have been tempted by this analogy. "He loved the Union as it was then constituted," argues Auchampaugh, "with the feeling of devotion as strong as that with which he had worshipped the daughter of the great Lancaster ironmonger years before."<sup>39</sup> Auchampaugh also quotes a contemporary of Buchanan's, who averred that "Mr. Buchanan would have been more of a man with a wife. Understanding the family relation by experience would have made him a broader statesman. He would not have been so cold, and he would then have had better friends."<sup>40</sup> Nichols suggests that "emotionally he had never been perfectly adjusted" after Ann's

death. But it is John Updike who has succumbed most fully to this temptation. His entire play, aptly titled *Buchanan Dying*, consists of Buchanan on his deathbed being visited by a Dickensian array of ghosts from his past. The Ann Coleman/South Carolina allegory provides most of the play's dramatic movement. For example, Updike manufactures Ann's letter to Buchanan breaking off their engagement, and then has it read out in place of the actual letter sent to Buchanan by the "commissioners" from the newly seceded state of North Carolina.<sup>41</sup>

Buchanan's conceptualization of the Union is important, I think, beyond the mere fact that it drives this central biographical allegory, as seductive as that allegory may be. Auchampaugh notes that Buchanan "exhibited a tendency to place the object of his affections on a pedestal,"<sup>42</sup> and Buchanan's romancing of the Union, as perhaps a representative trope of nineteenth-century presidential discourse, is important because it illustrates a key limitation of both Tuli's conception of rhetoric and of the prerhetorical presidency. The failure to apprehend rhetoric as the art of public seduction is correlative to the failure to perceive the Union as living, dynamic, and therefore needful of loving engagement rather than emplacement upon a distanced pedestal.

The most important address of Buchanan's presidency probably was his "lame-duck" annual message to Congress, delivered in early December of 1860; accordingly, I will attend carefully to this address. However, only the first few pages of that document address the secession crisis, and it therefore represents too small a sample from which to generalize a theory of Buchanan's rhetoric. Thus, I begin my analysis with a review of Buchanan's rhetorical corpus, developing four central themes through which he idealizes the Union: nature, detachment, voting, and family. As this review unfolds, it becomes clear that each of these is a topos of repression, naming a set of motives through which forces potentially harmful to the placid and inert beauty of the Union might be kept at bay.

## NATURE

Buchanan was not a religious man; indeed, he struggled with his faith throughout his life, wondering at his inability to experience a legitimate conversion experience. Besides the obligatory calls for the Almighty to keep the United States always under His benevolent gaze, God plays no very dominant role in Buchanan's public address. Seldom, if ever, does Buchanan call

upon the citizens to preserve the Union through adherence to God's law. Nature, however, often is invoked for this purpose. Buchanan repeatedly urges his audiences to assume a passive posture and merely to allow nature to take its course, particularly as regards the subject of slavery.

Buchanan's views on slavery in this regard comport with those of many of his contemporaries, in that he believed that latitude and climate placed absolute limitations on the spread of slavery. In an 1845 Senate speech on the annexation of Texas, for example, he declares that "slavery is destined to exist in Texas, whether we admit her into our Union or not."<sup>43</sup> Two years later, in the "Harvest Home" letter in which he proposed extending the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific, he declares that "it is morally impossible . . . that a majority of the emigrants to that portion of [California] South of 36° 30', which will be chiefly composed of our fellow citizens from the Eastern, Middle & Western States, will ever re-establish slavery within its limits."<sup>44</sup> That nature should be allowed to take its course also is the theme of this assessment of the Lecompton/Topeka controversy concerning the admission of Kansas in his 1858 annual message to Congress: "Left to manage and control its own affairs in its own way, without the pressure of external influence, the revolutionary Topeka organizations and all resistance to the territorial government established by Congress have been finally abandoned. As a natural consequence, that fine Territory now appears to be tranquil and prosperous, and is attracting increasing thousands of immigrants to make it their happy home."<sup>45</sup> The theme reappears in his third annual message in 1859, in which he proclaims that "from natural causes the slavery question will in each case soon virtually settle itself" and that the admission of Kansas into the union is "a foregone conclusion."<sup>46</sup>

The Union, then, can be preserved by bringing the political climate into alignment with natural edicts. This sense of idealized piety toward a natural order also begins to suggest a limitation on presidential influence. If it is only "natural" that slavery should not extend north of 36° 30', and that Kansas should have been admitted as a state under Lecompton, then little is left for the president to do. Buchanan continually engaged in what Philip Klein calls "downgrading the presidency," releasing the presidency from power and responsibility in inverse proportion to the level of crisis he faced. Inclined to let things run their course toward their natural end, Buchanan could offer little by way of rhetorical direction or, indeed, rhetorical salve. He felt it best to merely stay out of the way, for commitment to any course of action that might impede nature's progress would betray and endanger the Union.

## DETACHMENT

Buchanan labored also, in his discourse, to keep the Union safe by insulating it from unwarranted passion or interest. Of course, he was too long in politics to believe that political communication itself should be, or could be, dispassionate. His descriptions of partisan politics contain the familiar militaristic images; in the 1847 "Harvest Home" letter, for example, he rejoices that "the glorious Democracy of 'Old Berks' are buckling on their armor & preparing for the approaching contest," and warns that "in this contest, emphatically, he that is not for us is against us."<sup>47</sup> His public and private political duel with Stephen A. Douglas over the Lecompton constitution is legendary, and his efforts to pass the constitution through the House were aggressive enough to draw the attention of a congressional investigation.<sup>48</sup> Nor does Buchanan seem to shy away from brandishing warlike rhetoric when discussing various topics, such as the transcontinental railroad, which in his inaugural address as well as in all four of his annual messages to Congress he justified by reference to the authority given Congress by the Constitution to "appropriate money towards the construction of a military road" for the defense of California and Pacific territories.<sup>49</sup> Allan Nevins argues that the "key" to Buchanan's character "is to be found in a quality not easily explained: in a deep irresolution,"<sup>50</sup> but there seems little in Buchanan's political history to suggest that he would hesitate to wade knee-deep into the blood sport that was nineteenth-century U.S. politics when he felt it necessary or advantageous to do so.

It was when speaking of the Union, though, that Buchanan exhibited a desire to curtail passionate arguments at almost any cost. The Union, for Buchanan, could not be sullied as could other political entities, such as mere elections or railroads. For example, in his 1856 response to the "Committee of Notification" which informed him of his nomination as the Democratic candidate for president, Buchanan notes that "Most happy would it be for the country if this long agitation [over slavery] were at an end. During its whole progress it has produced no practical good to any human being, whilst it has been the source of great and dangerous evils. It has alienated and estranged one portion of the Union from the other, and has even seriously threatened its very existence."<sup>51</sup> Note that this statement, like others, is ideologically opaque. Buchanan does not express a desire to resolve one way or the other the issues which are fomenting the agitation, nor indeed to resolve them at all, but merely to quell the excitement—to bring the agitation to an end. In his second annual message to Congress, he discusses the Lecompton controversy by noting that "it is to be lamented that a question



so insignificant, when viewed in its practical effects on the people of Kansas, whether decided one way or the other, should have kindled such a flame of excitement throughout the country."<sup>52</sup> The questions themselves—whether Kansas should be a slave or a free state, or whether Lecompton represented the true sentiments of the population of Kansas—are not as significant to Buchanan as the uproar that they have created. This disturbance can only “retard” the “material progress” of the people of the territories, and “divert them from their useful employments, by prematurely exciting angry political contests among themselves, for the benefit of aspiring leaders.”<sup>53</sup> Again, the most significant danger stems not from the specific qualities of the controversy, but rather from the very existence of public controversy itself.

Significantly, this sense of cool detachment seems to extend to Buchanan's conception of the role of the president. Just as the Union cannot be besmirched by controversy, so too Buchanan cannot allow himself to swim in the mire. Repeatedly, and throughout his discourse, he energetically excuses himself from the field of action. Most often, he claims to be unable to act at all—the Constitution has granted only Congress, or the judiciary, the power to do so. The Constitution, then, is cited in defense of executive disinterest. For example, in the “Silliman” letter, written in August 1857, to “a group of clergyman, Yale professors, and citizens of Connecticut” who “had become alarmed at the large armament in Kansas marshaled against the free-state city of Lawrence,”<sup>54</sup> Buchanan admits that it is “quite true that a controversy had previously arisen respecting the validity of the election of members of the Territorial legislature and of the laws passed by them,” but goes on to note that “at the time I entered upon my official duties, Congress had recognized this legislature in different enactments. . . . Under these circumstances,” he asks, “what was my duty?”<sup>55</sup> And in this same letter Buchanan describes a Congress that can, at best, occupy a merely reactive role: “illegal and dangerous combinations, such as that of the Topeka convention, will not be disturbed, unless they shall attempt to perform some act which will bring them into actual collision with the Constitution and the laws.”<sup>56</sup>

In his first annual message to Congress, and again addressing the Lecompton controversy, Buchanan quotes from the Constitution in delimiting his role, declaring that “it was far from my intention to interfere with the decision of the people of Kansas, either for or against slavery” and that being merely “intrusted [sic] with the duty of taking ‘care that the laws be faithfully executed,’ my only desire was that the people of Kansas should furnish to Congress the evidence required by the organic act, whether for or against slavery; and in this manner smooth their passage

into the Union.”<sup>57</sup> The situation in Utah was accorded the same treatment: “With the religious opinions of the Mormons,” Buchanan declares, “as long as they remained mere opinions, however deplorable in themselves and revolting to the moral and religious sentiments of all Christendom, I had no right to interfere. Actions alone, when in violation of the Constitution and laws of the United States, become the legitimate subjects for the jurisdiction of the civil magistrate.”<sup>58</sup> On July 9, 1860, Buchanan spoke to a crowd that had gathered before the White House to hear his views on the nomination of his vice president, John C. Breckinridge, for president by a Democratic Party faction. Breckinridge had been nominated by the southern Democrats who had broken up the regular Democratic Convention in Charleston. Buchanan seems either unwilling or unable to perceive the degree to which the state of the Union had disintegrated, blaming the break up of the Democratic Convention, for example, not on sectional tensions but on the “abandonment of the old Congressional convention or caucus.”<sup>59</sup> He also reiterated his views on Kansas-Nebraska and Lecompton, though by now these issues had been superseded in importance by others: “I most cheerfully admit that Congress has no right to pass any law to establish, impair, or abolish slavery in the Territories. Let this principle of non-intervention be extended to the Territorial legislatures,” he continues, “and let it be declared that they in like manner have no power to establish, impair or destroy slavery, and then the controversy is in effect ended. That is all that is required at present, and I verily believe all that will ever be required.”<sup>60</sup>

Like Buchanan's rhetorical commitment to natural processes, his commitment to dispassionate detachment encourages a passive political posture. The issues that threatened the Union could not be discussed without considerable emotional involvement—as Buchanan well knew—so by bracketing such involvement from public debate Buchanan effectively bracketed himself. I do not mean to attribute to Buchanan a conscious intention in this regard that I cannot confirm. But certainly his repeated calls for detached discussion in a climate of escalating emotional tension kept him from being able to participate effectively in public debates over the most significant issues of his time.

## VOTING

For Buchanan, a free election represents the single most important institution through which to achieve the detached and impartial judgment he seems

to seek. In the face of the vox populi, all the irrational chattering of misplaced emotionalism must cease. The ballot box, for Buchanan, is the mechanism that connects the Constitution to the will of the people; if the Union sanctioned through that Constitution is to be saved, and if it is to be saved through the will of its inhabitants, then it must be saved through voting. At the same time, the ballot box also serves as an insulator, keeping inappropriate emotions from leaking into, and thus spoiling, public debate. Buchanan makes these connections explicit in his inaugural address. "We have recently passed through a presidential contest in which the passions of our fellow-citizens were excited to the highest degree by questions of deep and vital importance," he points out, "but when the people proclaimed their will, the tempest at once subsided, and all was calm. The voice of the majority, speaking in the manner prescribed by the Constitution, was heard, and instant submission followed."<sup>61</sup>

The national issue that provided Buchanan with the best opportunities to expound upon the palliative powers of the ballot box was the Lecompton fiasco. In 1856, Buchanan supported Douglas's doctrine of "popular sovereignty"; in his response to the "notification" committee informing him of his nomination, for example, Buchanan explains that the "Nebraska-Kansas act does no more than give the force of law to this elementary principle of self-government [popular sovereignty], declaring it to be 'the true intent and meaning of this act not to legislate slavery into any Territory or State, nor to exclude it therefrom, but to leave the people thereof perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way, subject only to the Constitution of the United States.'"<sup>62</sup> Douglas was soon to break ranks with Buchanan over this issue, of course, with Douglas declaring that the proslavery Lecompton constitution was not the true voice of the people. Buchanan, as David Zarefsky has pointed out, saw immediate submission of the Lecompton constitution as a way to "remove the Kansas question from the public forum"<sup>63</sup> and thus quiet debate; Buchanan was not moved by Douglas's insistence that the Lecompton constitution was perhaps legal but certainly not valid.

But Buchanan's rhetoric suggests more than merely a procedural fixation; he elevates the act of voting itself to nearly godlike status. The Union might be preserved if it submitted to the outcome of a vote—it mattered not what the particular outcome was, merely that it was appreciated as properly authoritative. "Let the blame fall upon the heads of the guilty," Buchanan told the Connecticut citizens in the "Silliman" letter of August 15, 1857, regarding the refusal of the antislavery forces to send delegates to Lecompton and their establishment of a rival convention at Topeka. Buchanan was compelled to send troops to Kansas, he explains, because a "portion of the people of Kansas, unwilling to trust to the

ballot-box—the certain American remedy for the redress of grievances—undertook to create an independent government for themselves."<sup>64</sup> This was "a fair opportunity . . . presented for all the qualified resident citizens of the Territory, to whatever organization they might have previously belonged, to participate in the election, and to express their opinions at the ballot box on the question of slavery. But numbers of lawless men still continued to resist the regular territorial government."<sup>65</sup> Again, it seems unimportant to Buchanan what the outcome of the vote may be; it is the process itself that might preserve the Union.

In his second annual message, delivered to Congress on December 6, 1858, he reiterates that "This refusal to vote has been the prolific source of all the evils which have followed," and that the Topeka organization has been "finally abandoned" once the population of Kansas was "left to manage and control its own affairs in its own way, without the pressure of external influence."<sup>66</sup> Even in January 1861, after South Carolina had seceded from the Union, Buchanan did not lose faith in the restorative powers of the popular voice. Secession is the result, he is "firmly convinced," of a "misapprehension at the south of the sentiments of the majority in several of the northern States. Let the question be transferred from political assemblies to the ballot-box," he continues, "and the people themselves would speedily redress the serious grievances which the south have [sic] suffered."<sup>67</sup>

Buchanan's unyielding faith in the ballot box as a site wherein the Union might be saved is almost bizarre given that the results of the 1860 election were themselves responsible for a precipitous rise in sectional tension. And while his commitments to *nature* and to *detachment* imply an attenuated role for the president in times of crisis, his commitment to *voting* as the overriding mechanism through which the Constitution is given voice pushes the president's relationship with the Union dangerously close to dysfunction. It is one thing to imply that the Union is under the sway of natural forces, but quite another to say that the president has no influence that might—or should—disrupt the tally of the ballots. If fashioning a passive role for the Union was inappropriate, fashioning a passive role for the presidency was a recipe for chaos.

## FAMILY

The potential for dysfunction in the passive relationship that Buchanan encourages between the president and the Union is exacerbated by the fact that in Buchanan's discourse the Union is frequently framed through family metaphors. Specifically, this family is closely associated with slavery. Indeed, for



Buchanan, it seems that the Union *is* the master–slave relationship, so that a disruption of that relationship signifies a disruption of the Union itself.

The connection is perhaps most clearly seen in his first annual message to Congress, delivered on December 8, 1857. Defending the plan to submit a constitution for ratification by the people of Kansas Territory in two versions, “with slavery” and “without slavery,” Buchanan argues—*contra* Douglas—that the plan is in accordance with the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which had organized the territories in 1854, because that Act leaves the people of the territory “perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way.”<sup>68</sup> Performing an inventive bit of rhetorical analysis, Buchanan neatly installs the slavery question firmly within the domestic sphere: “According to the plain construction of the sentence, the words ‘domestic institutions’ have a direct as they have an appropriate reference to slavery. ‘Domestic institutions’ are limited to the family. The relations between master and slave and a few others are ‘domestic institutions,’ and are entirely distinct from institutions of a political character.”<sup>69</sup> The theme reemerges in his third annual message to Congress of December 19, 1859, when he warns that reopening the African slave trade would mean “the introduction of wild, heathen and ignorant barbarians among the sober, orderly, and quiet slaves whose ancestors have been on the soil for several generations,” and thus make it likely that the “feeling of reciprocal dependence and attachment which now exists between master and slave would be converted into mutual distrust and hostility.”<sup>70</sup> Such a disruption of the domestic sphere would signal the disruption of the Union.

This family might be disrupted from without as well as from within; any disruption of the natural and harmonious master/slave relationship might signal the end of the Union, and thus the domestic sphere must be protected at all costs. In his statement to the notification committee in 1856, for example, Buchanan invokes explicitly familial metaphors when he laments that the “agitation of the question of domestic slavery has too long distracted and divided the people of this Union and alienated their affections from each other.”<sup>71</sup> He promises that, “during the single term I shall remain in office,” he would use “all the power and influence Constitutionally possessed by the Executive . . . to restore the same harmony among the sister States which prevailed before this apple of discord, in the form of slavery agitation, had been cast into their midst. Let the members of the family abstain from intermeddling with the exclusive domestic concerns of each other,” he went on, “and cordially unite on the basis of perfect equality among themselves, in promoting the great national objects of common interest to all, and the good work will be instantly accomplished.”<sup>72</sup>

In his inaugural address he again relies upon explicit domestic imagery to observe that the issue has “alienated and estranged the people of the sister States from each other, and has even seriously endangered the very existence of the Union.”<sup>73</sup> Buchanan further emphasizes the sanctity of the domestic sphere, and further divides it from the political, by warning that “this question of domestic slavery is of far graver importance than any mere political question, because, should the agitation continue, it may eventually endanger the personal safety of a large portion of our countrymen where the institution exists. In that event, no form of government, however admirable in itself, and however productive of material benefits, can compensate for the loss of peace and domestic security around the family altar.”<sup>74</sup> And in his third annual message to Congress, of December 19, 1859, about two months after John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, Buchanan warns that “If the peace of the domestic fireside throughout these States should ever be invaded—if the mothers of families within this extensive region should not be able to retire to rest at night without suffering dreadful apprehensions of what may be their own fate and that of their children before the morning—it would be vain to recount to such a people the political benefits which result to them from the Union.”<sup>75</sup> But he professes to “indulge in no such gloomy forebodings” and is hopeful that “the events at Harper’s Ferry” will cause people “to pause and reflect upon the possible peril to their cherished institutions” and thus “will be the means, under Providence, of allaying the existing excitement and preventing further outbreaks of a similar character.”<sup>76</sup>

This image of menaced domesticity is perhaps presented most strongly in the speech that Buchanan delivered to the crowd at the White House on July 9, 1860, after the nomination of Breckinridge. He warns that the “division of the great Democratic party, should it continue, would rend asunder one of the most powerful links which bind the Union together,” but is peculiarly optimistic that the “present issue is transitory, and will speedily pass away.” The most pressing danger involves the possibility that “Northern agitation and fanaticism shall proceed so far as to render the domestic firesides of the South insecure, then, and not till then, will the Union be in danger. A united Northern Democracy will present a wall of fire against such a catastrophe!”<sup>77</sup>

For Buchanan, then, the Union is figured as a political family constituted by the master–slave relationship and thus threatened by antislavery forces. To disrupt those “domestic” relations is to disrupt the Union: the Union is not merely *like* a family, it *is* a family. Buchanan’s role is to protect that family from those forces by gallantly protecting it from the contentious world of

politics. And yet he cannot assume this gallant role, because he has rendered himself passive. Through his familial discourse of Union, Buchanan has created a role for the president that he himself cannot fulfill.

### FINAL MESSAGE

Having thus surveyed Buchanan's presidential discourse to discern certain characteristic tendencies, I can now turn my attention to his final annual message to Congress. In the months leading up to this address, President James Buchanan was a busy, if somewhat distracted, man. In May, the Democratic Convention had broken up in Charleston. In June, Buchanan was host to "a large delegation of Japanese dignitaries who had come to the United States for the signing of the first commercial treaty to be negotiated by this mysterious Oriental Empire."<sup>78</sup> Later that month, the Democrats again imploded, this time in Baltimore; eventually, in separate conventions, they nominated both Stephen A. Douglas and John C. Breckinridge for president. In September, the Prince of Wales visited Washington, D.C., prompting a whirlwind of high society activities that distracted Buchanan sufficiently to motivate him to issue an edict banning dancing in the White House.<sup>79</sup> In November, the day after Lincoln's election, federal troops from Fort Moultrie were barred from accessing supplies from a private wharf in Charleston's harbor. On November 10, Senator James Chestnut of South Carolina resigned, followed immediately by his colleague James Hammond. On November 13, Robert Toombs of Georgia urged the state legislature to "Withdraw yourselves" from the Union, and to "make another war of independence" if the northern abolitionists objected.

On December 3, 1860, Buchanan sent his "lame duck" fourth annual message to Congress. It is a curious address, bringing into collusion each of the four themes I have discussed and, thus, proving rather spectacularly ill-suited to the moment. It is a characteristically lengthy document, and most of it is taken up with a rehearsal of various foreign relations coups and setbacks and settlements of accounts. These are relevant in that they suggest the direction of the president's attention, but I want to concentrate particularly on the sections of the speech that address directly the domestic secession crisis.

After noting that the country is "eminently prosperous in all its material interests," Buchanan asks with alarming understatement why "discontent now so extensively prevails?" The answer is not slavery, nor the recent troubled election, but the agitation itself: "The long and intemperate inter-

ference of the northern people with the question of slavery in the southern States has at length produced its natural effects."<sup>80</sup> As Buchanan develops this theme, the opening paragraphs of his message exhibit a progressive and almost cinematic narrowing of scope, from the national political crisis down to a portrait of menaced domestic tranquility. "The immediate peril arises," Buchanan notes, "from the fact that the incessant and violent agitation of the slavery question has at length produced its malign influence on the slaves, and inspired them with vague notions of freedom. Hence a sense of security no longer exists around the family altar. This feeling of peace at home has given place to apprehensions of servile insurrections. Many a matron throughout the South retires at night in dread of what may befall herself and her children before the morning."<sup>81</sup> Here, at the family hearth, is where the seeds of secession are first fertilized, for "should this apprehension of domestic danger, whether real or imaginary, extend, and intensify itself, until it shall pervade the masses of the southern people, then disunion will become inevitable."<sup>82</sup>

After a brief review of the "five and twenty years the agitation at the North against slavery has been incessant,"<sup>83</sup> Buchanan's comments on the importance of a dispassionate public sphere suggest the intimate connection with domesticity—the crisis could be removed from public discussion if citizens attended only to matters of directly personal importance: "How easy 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, can do it. All that is necessary to accomplish the object, and all for which the slave States have ever contended, is to be let alone and permitted to manage their domestic institutions in their own way."<sup>84</sup>

The only way for citizens to participate in public debate is through the insulating mechanism of the ballot box. This mechanism overrides the president's influence, for if the vote provides the only way to quiet sectional tensions, then Buchanan, or any president, can do little to mend or to rend the Union: "Wisely limited and restrained as is his power under our Constitution and laws, he alone can accomplish but little for good or for evil on such a momentous question."<sup>85</sup> Somewhat paradoxically, because in Buchanan's view the powers of the president are so severely limited, the voice of the people as expressed in a presidential election is itself also limited in its importance: "the election of any one of our fellow-citizens to the office of the President does not of itself afford just cause for dissolving the Union."<sup>86</sup> Like other apparent paradoxes in Buchanan's discourse, this one is resolved by noting the conception of the Union that Buchanan

is developing. Its survival is of the utmost and governing importance; the Union is untouchable and inscrutable, and attempts to engage it always are dangerous. Neither the president, in following the constitutional laws, nor the people, by fulfilling their constitutional obligations, can do anything to imperil its sanctity. If Lincoln were to “invade” the constitutional rights of the South, then that might be cause for “revolutionary resistance,” but “he is no more than the chief executive officer of the government” charged “not to make but to execute the laws” and, thus, “must necessarily be conservative.”<sup>87</sup> Lincoln, therefore, cannot single-handedly usher in Armageddon, and the “day of evil may never come unless we shall rashly bring it upon ourselves.”<sup>88</sup>

The potential power of the vote is further limited, for even laws and policies that have been popularly endorsed at the ballot box can be erased through the power of the Constitution. The territorial prohibitions of slavery in Kansas, for example, are “plainly violating the rights of property secured by the Constitution,” they “will surely be declared void by the judiciary,” and all state or territorial laws passed in defiance of the Fugitive Slave Law have “been passed in violation of the federal Constitution” and “are therefore null and void.”<sup>89</sup> Clearly, “it will be the duty of the next President, as it has been my own, to act with vigor in executing this supreme law against the conflicting enactments of State legislatures. Should he fail in the performance of this high duty, he will then have manifested a disregard of the Constitution and laws, to the great injury of the people of nearly one half of the States of the Union.”<sup>90</sup> Buchanan warns that unless state legislatures “repeal their unconstitutional and obnoxious enactments,” and thus “without unnecessary delay” bring their state laws into alignment with the Constitution as interpreted in the Dred Scott decision, “it is impossible for any human power to save the Union.”<sup>91</sup> Indeed, if this action is not taken, then “the injured States, after having first used all peaceful and constitutional means to obtain redress, would be justified in revolutionary resistance to the government of the Union.”<sup>92</sup> Ultimately, it is alignment with the Constitution which can save the Union; the Constitution is, for Buchanan, natural, disinterested, operationalized through the vote, and ascendant over the domestic sphere.

These remarks are prefatory to the most curious and problematic section of Buchanan’s fourth annual message. He notes that “it has been claimed within the last few years that any State, whenever this shall be its sovereign will and pleasure, may secede from the Union in accordance with the Constitution, and without any violation of the constitutional rights of the other

members of the Confederacy.”<sup>93</sup> This argument Buchanan denies, for it promotes a Union of “many petty, jarring, and hostile republics, each one retiring from the Union without responsibility whenever any sudden excitement might impel them to such a course.”<sup>94</sup> Quoting extensively from both Jackson’s and Madison’s renunciations of the theory of nullification, and from both the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution, Buchanan argues that the Union was “intended to be perpetual, and not to be annulled at the pleasure of any one of the contracting parties.” The states are provided with a mechanism for redress against the federal government—revolution. And, for Buchanan, “secession is neither more nor less than revolution.”<sup>95</sup>

Having thus established that the states have no constitutional right to secede, Buchanan then establishes that neither the president nor Congress has any constitutional authority to stop them. There currently is no federal authority in South Carolina, Buchanan notes, and thus the hands of the federal government are tied. There are no obstacles that “lie in the way of executing the laws for the collection of the customs,” so these will continue to be collected; and though “it is not believed that any attempt will be made to expel the United States . . . by force” from the forts at Charleston, Buchanan reveals that Robert Anderson “has received orders to act strictly on the defensive” should any such attack occur. “Apart from the execution of the laws,” however, “so far as this may be practicable, the Executive has no authority to decide what shall be the relations between the federal government and South Carolina.” Thus, in characteristic Buchananian fashion, he excuses himself from the conversation: “It is . . . my duty to submit to Congress the whole question in all its bearings.”<sup>96</sup> However, lest Congress harbor any fantasies about being able to “coerce a State into submission which is attempting to withdraw or has actually withdrawn from the Confederacy,” he states that “after much serious reflection, I have arrived at the conclusion that no such power has been delegated to Congress or to any other department of the federal government.”<sup>97</sup> Indeed, even if such power were available, it would be unwise to deploy it.

For the “fact is,” Buchanan concludes, “that our Union rests upon public opinion, and can never be cemented by the blood of its citizens shed in civil war. If it cannot live in the affections of the people it must one day perish.”<sup>98</sup> But at the same time, “We should reflect that, under this free government, there is an incessant ebb and flow in public opinion. The slavery question, like everything human, will have its day,” and it would be a grave mistake to destroy the Union based upon so transient a thing as public opinion. He then finishes this section of the message with a proposal for a constitutional

amendment that would: (1) recognize the right of property in slaves in slave states, (2) extend this protection to the territories, (3) recognize the validity of the Fugitive Slave Law and render all oppositional state laws null and void. Buchanan pleads that such an amendment “ought to be tried in a spirit of conciliation before any of these States shall separate themselves from the Union,”<sup>99</sup> but it is difficult to see how an amendment scented so strongly by magnolias and juleps could have been made palatable to northerners. And, again, the proposed amendment seeks to maintain the Union by resolving three of the central points of controversy through explicit submission to the ultimate authority of the Constitution.

### CONCLUSION

At the 1856 Democratic Convention in Cincinnati, Jeremiah Black, who became Buchanan’s attorney general, felt it necessary to defend Buchanan’s bachelor status. At the conclusion of the seventeenth ballot, in which Buchanan finally achieved the nomination, Black rose, in part, “to vindicate Pennsylvania’s favorite son against the charge of having failed in that higher duty which every man owes to himself, to society and to the sweeter sex. Mr. Buchanan, we confess, is a bachelor. But the reason is a complete vindication as will, I am sure, satisfy every gentleman here present. It is this—as soon as James Buchanan was old enough to marry, he became wedded to the Constitution of his country, and the laws of Pennsylvania do not allow a man to have more than one wife.”<sup>100</sup>

The Constitution does enjoy a privileged status within Buchanan’s discourse. It provides the mechanism through which the purity of the Union, and of Buchanan himself, must be maintained, and it is the ultimate authority under which the voice of the people, and the voice of Buchanan, must submit. But the most significant matrimonial couple here is not Buchanan and the Constitution but rather Buchanan and the Union; the Constitution plays rather the role of justice of the peace. The marriage between Union and Buchanan is a peculiarly chaste one, in which both parties are assigned rather passive roles. Proceeding according to the dictates of nature, for example, is one way to preserve the placid calm that is essential to the health of the Union. Neither the Union nor Buchanan is to be proactive in this regard, except to seek out these dictates and then to abide by them. Mutual disinterest also is to be maintained, so that neither Buchanan nor the object of his affections are tarred by the brush of excessive passion. A strict submission to

the vote is to be prized, also, by both parties, but only to the extent that the people’s discordant voices are regulated by the dictates of the Constitution. And, finally, the Union should be firmly insulated from the rough-and-tumble political world; it is domestic in character, and thus its harmonies must be protected against the political world by a wall of fire. As the “irrepressible conflict” escalated, Buchanan was powerless to address it. The Union was on an unapproachable pedestal and the president was a powerless prop. Constrained by an unbridgeable romantic distance, he could do nothing but watch while the Union dissolved.

Buchanan’s rhetoric may be typical, in many ways, of nineteenth-century presidential discourse. Certainly it embodies many of the characteristics of the “pre-rhetorical” presidency as outlined by Tulis. Tulis argues that Lincoln, for example, though a far more vigorous president than Buchanan, still was constrained by the rhetorical limitations of the nineteenth century. A cursory perusal of Lincoln’s first inaugural shows that he does, indeed, sound many of the same themes that characterize Buchanan’s rhetoric. But Lincoln also provides this analogy: “A husband and wife may be divorced, and go out of the presence, and beyond the reach of each other; but the different parts of our country cannot do this. They cannot but remain face to face; and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them.”<sup>101</sup> Neither Buchanan, nor the Union he constructs, would allow for hostile intercourse to taint the romantic mood. But in the rhetorical universe Lincoln is constructing, the communicative relationship itself is to be privileged; this relationship may not always be genteel, as Lincoln acknowledges, but the important thing is to acknowledge that the relationship always must continue.

That James Buchanan badly underestimated the extent to which the Union was in danger of disintegration is clear, but of equal importance to scholars interested in public discourse is the fact that Buchanan’s misjudgments stem from his underestimation of the power of rhetoric. He perceived the ideal political sphere as a fragile realm easily endangered by emotional and ornamental excess, so he attempted to insulate the Union by framing it within a discourse of natural, reasonable, and procedural domesticity. He made use of a highly disciplined mode of rhetoric to attempt to discipline an increasingly unruly Union; his public discourse was disinterested and purified to the point of banality, a rhetoric of quiet and safety wholly unable to address an exigency of crisis and passion. Rhetorical effectiveness requires risk; so does a conception of rhetoric as constitutive and architectonic. An entirely instrumental conception of rhetoric is a safe one, since it keeps the bogeys of emotion and desire at bay by imagining the public sphere as a rational

realm. But such a conception of rhetoric also, as Buchanan's discourse amply demonstrates, severely limits its potential. If rhetoric has no power to reshape ideas of what is "natural," if it is stripped down to mere rationality, if it is disciplined under the sign of popular opinion or unalienable authority, and if it is allowed only to inhabit the domestic sphere in the hope of holding public debate in quarantine—then rhetoric can offer little to a people on the brink of disintegration.

Thus it is that Buchanan's lack of rhetorical skill does not render him useless to rhetoricians. He was governed by the norms of nineteenth-century presidential discourse, and Buchanan's biography and his historical circumstances, together with his minimal rhetorical competence, conspired to bring the potential dangers of these norms into rather stark relief. Rhetoric is not easily tamed, and discourse which appears to be tamed can present to its practitioners and to its auditors only the illusion of a natural, rational, disciplined, and domesticated public sphere. Such illusions do not only obscure the inevitable crises of democratic life, but also offer to the public some inventional resources that are woefully inadequate to address those crises when they can no longer be ignored. James Buchanan, then, provides a powerful cautionary tale: all presidencies are rhetorical, even those in the nineteenth century, and the failure to recognize this fact can severely cripple our ability to sustain a robust democracy into the twenty-first century.

## NOTES

1. All of these surveys are available online, respectively:

<http://www.udayton.edu/~polsci/siena.htm>;

<http://www.isi.org/whatsnew/presresults.asp>;

<http://www.americanpresidents.org/survey/historians/overall.asp>;

<http://www.americanpresidents.org/survey/viewer/overall.asp>;

<http://www.opinionjournal.com/hail/rankings.html>.

2. William J. Ridings Jr. and Stuart B. McIver, *Rating the Presidents: A Ranking of U.S. Leaders, from the Great and Honorable to the Dishonest and Incompetent* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1997), 98.

3. Charles F. Faber and Richard B. Faber, *The American Presidents Ranked by Performance* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2000), 12.

4. Michael J. Birkner, "Introduction: Getting to Know James Buchanan, Again," in *James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s*, ed. Michael J. Birkner (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 1996), 17, 29.

5. William E. Gienapp, "'No Bed of Roses': James Buchanan, Abraham Lincoln, and Presidential Leadership in the Civil War Era," in *James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 110.

6. Robert E. May, "James Buchanan, the Neutrality Laws, and American Invasions of Nicaragua," in *James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 123.

7. Allan Nevins, *Prologue to Civil War, 1859–1861*, vol. 2 of *The Emergence of Lincoln* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 340.

8. John Updike, *Buchanan Dying: A Play* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 210. Updike's comments are part of a lengthy and quasi-scholarly commentary included as an appendix to the play. See also: John Updike, *Memories of the Ford Administration: A Novel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

9. Gienapp, "James Buchanan," 117.

10. Roy Franklin Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York: The Free Press, 1948), 83.

11. Updike, *Buchanan Dying*, 248.

12. *Ibid.*, 198.

13. Allan Nevins, *Douglas, Buchanan, and Party Chaos, 1857–1859*, vol. 1 of *The Emergence of Lincoln* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 422.

14. Nevins, *Prologue*, 361.

15. Updike, *Buchanan Dying*, 204.

16. Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 5, 14.

17. *Ibid.*, 18.

18. *Ibid.*, 27–45.

19. Gienapp, "James Buchanan," 119.

20. Philip Shriver Klein, *President James Buchanan: A Biography* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), 204.

21. John Bassett Moore, ed., *The Works of James Buchanan: Comprising his Speeches, State Papers, and Private Correspondence*, vol. 11 (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1910), 95–96.

22. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 14.

23. Edwin Black, "The Ultimate Voice of Lincoln," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3 (2000):

50.

24. *Ibid.*, 51, 54.

25. *Ibid.*, 51.

26. *Ibid.*, 55–56.

27. Rhetorical scholars have vigorously investigated the impulse to frame various central tenets of American political life as fragile or feminine. Some examples include: Michael Calvin McGee, "The Origins of 'Liberty': A Feminization of Power," *Communication Monographs* 47 (1980): 23–45; Robert L. Ivie, "The Ideology of Freedom's 'Fragility' in American Foreign Policy Argument," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 24 (1987): 27–36; James Jasinski, "The Feminization of Liberty, Domesticated Virtue, and the Reconstitution of Power and Authority in Early American Political Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 146–64.

28. Philip G. Auchampaugh, "James Buchanan, The Bachelor of the White House: An Inquiry on the Subject of Feminine Influence in the Life of our Fifteenth President," *Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 20 (1939): 155. Auchampaugh's essay appears in two parts in the journal, in subsequent issues within the same volume; the complete pagination is: 154–66, 218–34.

29. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 31.

30. *Ibid.*, 28.

31. *Ibid.*, 30.

32. Auchampaugh, "James Buchanan," 159.
33. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 32.
34. George Ticknor Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan: Fifteenth President of the United States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1883), 18–19.
35. Nichols, *Disruption*, 88.
36. Auchampaugh, "James Buchanan," 163.
37. *Ibid.*, 162.
38. Jasinski, "Feminization of Liberty," 149, 159.
39. Auchampaugh, "James Buchanan," 162.
40. *Ibid.*, 159.
41. Updike, *Buchanan Dying*, 137–39.
42. Auchampaugh, "James Buchanan," 158–59.
43. Moore, *Works*, 6:107.
44. *Ibid.*, 7:387.
45. *Ibid.*, 10:236.
46. *Ibid.*, 10:342.
47. *Ibid.*, 7:385.
48. "On March 5, 1859, the House adopted a resolution to investigate whether the president had tried to influence the votes of Congressmen on the English Bill by improper means" (Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 338). The English Bill was a scheme (or a compromise, depending on one's political leanings) that assured that Kansas would come into the Union under the proslavery Lecompton constitution. The investigative committee, headed by John Covode of Pennsylvania, produced a widely circulated and ponderous volume that suggested that Buchanan was a puppet controlled by the slave power. It did not, however, recommend any resolutions of impeachment or censure.
49. Moore, *Works*, 10:112. See also 10:154–55; 10:273; 11:39.
50. Nevins, *Party Chaos*, 61.
51. Moore, *Works*, 10:83.
52. *Ibid.*, 10:238.
53. *Ibid.*, 10:241.
54. Nichols, *Disruption*, 123.
55. Moore, *Works*, 10:119.
56. *Ibid.*, 10:121.
57. *Ibid.*, 10:147.
58. *Ibid.*, 10:152.
59. *Ibid.*, 10:458.
60. *Ibid.*, 10:462.
61. *Ibid.*, 10:105.
62. *Ibid.*, 10:83.
63. David Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery: In the Crucible of Public Debate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 13.
64. Moore, *Works*, 10:120.
65. *Ibid.*, 10:121.
66. *Ibid.*, 10:236.
67. *Ibid.*, 11:97.
68. *Ibid.*, 10:149.
69. *Ibid.*, 10:149.
70. *Ibid.*, 10:345–46.
71. *Ibid.*, 10:82.

72. *Ibid.*, 10:84.
73. *Ibid.*, 10:108.
74. *Ibid.*, 10:109.
75. *Ibid.*, 10:340–41.
76. *Ibid.*, 10:341.
77. *Ibid.*, 10:463.
78. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 348.
79. Buchanan also ordered his niece and First Lady, Miss Harriet Lane, to remove her portraits from the rooms that the prince would occupy, apparently fearing that her attractive visage would distract young Edward Albert from important affairs of state. It seems that Buchanan was justified in his worry, for according to some reports the prince was somewhat smitten with the lovely Miss Lane. At any rate, this incident supplies further anecdotal evidence concerning Buchanan's distaste for any mixing of emotions and politics (Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 350).
80. Moore, *Works*, 11:7.
81. *Ibid.*, 11:7–8.
82. *Ibid.*, 11:8.
83. *Ibid.*
84. *Ibid.*
85. *Ibid.*, 11:9.
86. *Ibid.*
87. *Ibid.*
88. *Ibid.*, 11:10.
89. *Ibid.*, 11:10–11.
90. *Ibid.*, 11:12.
91. *Ibid.*
92. *Ibid.*
93. *Ibid.*
94. *Ibid.*, 11:13–14.
95. *Ibid.*, 11:17.
96. *Ibid.*, 11:18.
97. *Ibid.*, 11:19.
98. *Ibid.*, 11:20.
99. *Ibid.*, 11:24–25.
100. *Official Proceedings of the National Democratic Convention held in Cincinnati, June 2–6, 1856* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Enquirer Company Steam Printing Establishment, 1856), 59.
101. Lincoln's first inaugural is quoted in full in Marie Hochmuth Nichols, "Lincoln's First Inaugural," in *Landmark Essays on Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Thomas W. Benson (Davis, Calif.: Hermagoras Press, 1993), 66.