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JAMES BUCHANAN—ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO
ROBERT E. CARLSON

ALTHOUGH the day will pass with little official recognition, November 4 marks the one-hundredth anniversary of James Buchanan's election to the presidency. Since he is Pennsylvania's only native son to serve in that high office, it is fitting that we stop at the end of another presidential election year to review the events of his long career as a lawyer, diplomat, and politician in the service of his country.

James Buchanan was born on April 23, 1791, near Mercersburg, Pennsylvania; he was the second of eleven children born to James and Elizabeth (Speer) Buchanan. His parents, both Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, were descended from families that had migrated from Scotland and Ireland into south-central Pennsylvania during the second half of the eighteenth century. As a boy he received reasonably good education, first from his merchant-farmer father and well-read mother and later at a school in Mercersburg, where he was a student of Greek and Latin.

After this preparation, Buchanan's parents enrolled him at Dickinson College, where he was admitted to the junior class for the fall term in 1807. Unfortunately the College was not everything Buchanan hoped it would be, and the two years he spent there were not happy ones. Even at sixteen Buchanan here began to demonstrate the sober and industrious characteristics that were to mark his later life, but these were not the standard among many of the students. Apparently little discipline was enforced and the students did as they pleased, so that, as Buchanan later put it, "Without much natural tendency to become dissipated, and chiefly from the example of others, and in order to be considered a clever and a spirited youth, I engaged in every sort of extravagance and mischief in which the greatest proficient of the college indulged." Consequently he was almost expelled, and it was only through the extraordinary efforts of the pastor of the congregation to which his parents belonged that he was allowed to complete the senior year and graduate in 1809.

Buchanan had been "a tolerably hard student," interested in oratory and logic while at college, so after graduation he went to Lancaster, where he read law and was admitted to the bar late in 1812. As a Federalist, he openly opposed the declaration of war with England during that summer, but once the conflict began he felt it his patriotic duty to become a firm supporter of the Madison Administration in this issue; during the war he volunteered to serve with a company of dragoons.

After seeing duty in the defense of Baltimore and being honorably discharged, he entered politics and was elected to the Pennsylvania House in October, 1814 to represent Lancaster County. On serving two one-year terms, he "retired" from politics to give his full attention to his law practice, centered in Lancaster and several nearby counties and described as "extensive, laborious, and lucrative." Even though he achieved some considerable success in this work (his



income for the year ending April 1, 1819, was \$7,915.92), he returned to the political arena in 1820, when he was elected as a Federalist to represent Lancaster, York, and Dauphin Counties in the United States House; he took his seat on December 3, 1821.

While in the House, several significant events took place that helped shape Buchanan's career. As a man of moderate views he won

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many friends on both sides of the aisle; some of these close personal friendships lasted for many years and were deeply satisfying to this bachelor. With the death of the Federalist Party as a national entity in the middle of the twenties, Buchanan chose to become a follower of Andrew Jackson rather than affiliate with the new Whig Party as many of his colleagues had done. During the presidency of John Quincy Adams he was active and vocal in his opposition to the administration and by 1828 was in good position to play a leading role in the Jackson drive to win the White House. As chairman of the judiciary committee during his fifth term, he was admired for his carefully prepared and sound legal judgments, all of which reflected credit on his training and earlier experiences. By 1831 James Buchanan was a stalwart Jacksonian Democrat, ready to move to the front in that party on the national level.

As early as 1831 his position in Pennsylvania and in the Democratic Party was recognized by many, some of whom hoped to nominate him for the vice-presidency in 1832. One of these was his brother, George W. Buchanan, United States district attorney for the western district of Pennsylvania in Pittsburgh at the time, who wrote to his brother, "... in every county in which I have been, your nomination for the V. Py. is very popular. In Fayette & Washington, there will scarcely be a division of sentiment."

However, before this movement could gain sufficient momentum, Buchanan was chosen by President Jackson to become minister to Russia. Although he complained of having "much business now on hand which I could not immediately leave without doing serious injury to individuals who have confided in me" and of not being able to speak French, the language of diplomacy, and despite the quiet objections of his mother, he eventually accepted the appointment. Buchanan was a devoted follower of Old Hickory and here demonstrated a characteristic that marked his approach to politics—deep-seated loyalty to one's superiors.

Certainly Buchanan's mission to St. Petersburg cannot be classed as a vital and significant one in American diplomatic history, but his services overseas did accomplish several things. First, almost singlehanded, he negotiated a commercial treaty with Russia, in itself a novel and gratifying experience for a budding public servant. Then, in the process of this work, he began to see problems from an international point of view rather than from the strictly parochial American angle; this was a valuable asset for him. Finally—partially because of his extraordinary skill in letter writing—his already large personal popularity was increased so that his name became a familiar one in the United States. With the completion of this mission in August of 1833, Buchanan returned home to Lancaster, intending to retire from public service and re-establish his law practice. But

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again any long-range plans that he might have had in this direction were altered by demands placed on him by his party. Although some preferred that he should be an active candidate for the vice-presidency in 1836, the Pennsylvania Legislature intervened in late 1834 and elected him to fill the unexpired portion of William Wilkins' term as United States senator, an office Buchanan held for the next ten years. Always a staunch supporter of Democratic principles and policies, he soon became known as an administration stalwart who could be counted on to back Presidents Jackson and Van Buren; naturally he continued this role during the Whig interlude under Harrison and Tyler.

On more than one occasion during this decade, political friends, newspaper editors, and colleagues urged him to allow his name to be presented as a favorite-son candidate for either the vice-presidency or the presidency. In reply he usually followed one of two lines—either he was sure there were other candidates available who were better qualified for the nomination, and therefore his candidacy would only tend to impair party harmony, or he was not interested. As illustrations of the latter, in 1841 he told a newspaper editor "... I have no ambitious longings on this subject [the presidency]. ..." and a year later he wrote to his good friend, George G. Leiper, "I think there never was a man whose name had been mentioned for the Presidency who took the subject less to heart than myself. ..." Yet, despite his claim of having "totally abstained from all personal efforts to promote my own success" and an official withdrawal from the 1844 campaign, he still received a few votes from delegates to the Democratic national convention.

On the return of the Democrats to power in 1845 under James K. Polk, Buchanan was appointed to the important position of secretary of state. During the next four years he demonstrated his great capacity for conducting laborious and extended negotiations, giving his best from day to day with little attempt at the dramatic or ostentatious. His major accomplishments were the settlement of the Oregon question with Great Britain and, although he was overshadowed in this latter by the President, the admission of Texas and the negotiations ending the war with Mexico. In addition, he urged a vigorous application of the Monroe Doctrine, especially to discourage British infiltration into California and the Yucatán, and he called for the purchase of Cuba, a scheme he supported throughout his career that reached its climax in his authorship of the Ostend Manifesto.

When the Whigs won the presidency in 1848 (Buchanan's name again was presented to the national convention, but he made no real effort to win the nomination and received only 55 votes on the first ballot), James Buchanan left the public arena "at least for a season," took up residence in his newly acquired "Wheatland" outside Lancaster, and became a private citizen.

During this retirement he made several speeches and wrote numerous letters; in at least two of these he made mention of Pittsburgh. When speaking at Philadelphia early in 1851, he described Pittsburgh as the "Great Iron City of the West—a city of as much energy and enterprise for the number of inhabitants, as any on the face of the earth; and, I might add, of as warm and generous

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“Buchanan and Western Pennsylvania,” a study of newspaper editorial comment on Buchanan’s presidential campaign.

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hospitality.” Later that same year and in the same vein, he wrote to his niece, Harriet Lane, “If you have found the place blacker & dirtier than you had anticipated you will find the people warm-hearted, generous, kind, & agreeable.”

By late 1851, whether he was willing to admit it or not, Buchanan had begun a systematic appraisal of his chances for the presidential nomination the following June. Each state was considered in turn, and it appeared as though Buchanan was on the threshold of making his first full-fledged bid. But in almost the same breath, he still assured his confidential advisers, “I shall do my duty faithfully to myself & my friends; but am determined not to lose a night's rest or a meal's victuals, let the result be what it may.” By March, 1852, the strain of the contest was beginning to tell, clearly shown in a letter to Cave Johnson of Tennessee, “If nominated, very well: if not, with the blessings of Providence, I may look forward to a few years of peace & tranquillity before ‘shuffling off this mortal coil’.”

His fears were justified, for the Democrats were unable to select a candidate from the four leading contenders (Cass, Douglas, Marcy, and Buchanan) and settled on Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire, truly a dark horse who got the necessary two-thirds vote on the 49th ballot. Yet Buchanan was quite satisfied with the outcome; as he put it, “I can say, with the most sincere truth, that I feel far more deeply the disappointment of my friends than my own disappointment. This has not, and will not, cost me a single pang.” Once again he made plans to withdraw from public service. However, late in March, 1853, President Pierce altered these plans by appointing Buchanan to be minister to Great Britain; again the Pennsylvanian was confronted with the inevitable dilemma of duty to country and party versus his personal wishes. After offering several reasons that could justify a refusal, he finally accepted; this came after considerable pressure had been brought to bear by close political associates, who claimed duty to country and the preservation of party harmony made his acceptance imperative. Despite his age and the fact that he was not happy with the prospect of going abroad, he nevertheless told his brother, the Rev. Edward Y. Buchanan (who was married to Ann Eliza Foster, sister of Stephen Collins Foster), “... I intend to make the best of it & render myself as comfortable & happy as possible.” Although his ministry of three years was not marked by any outstanding diplomatic achievements, mainly because Secretary of State Marcy preferred to keep control of negotiations in his own hands, Buchanan did make many friends for the United States and himself in the Court of St. James.

While Buchanan was on duty in London, political friends continued their almost time-honored ritual of boosting him for the presidency. In reply to one such friend, Buchanan smartly wrote in 1854, “I shall not again be a candidate for the Presidency.” But this did not deter all of them; early in 1855 he had to tell another, “... I am not, nor shall I be,

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a candidate for any office.” And again, later in that same year, he wrote to Robert Tyler, “The presidency is a matter which I have dismissed from my thoughts. I shall not be a candidate for that office, and have lost all desire to enjoy this most distinguished honor.”

Despite all these pointed statements, several leading political figures took matters into their own hands and began a concerted drive to win the nomination for Buchanan in 1856. They saw in him the perfect candidate for the times. He was a man of broad and varied experiences—legislator, diplomat, administrator, all essential to a presidential nominee. He had been a loyal Democrat since the twenties and had a wide—but not necessarily enthusiastic—following among the party faithful. Despite his Northern origins, he had many friends among Southerners, primarily because of his stand on the extension of slavery into the territories. But, because he had been out of the country since 1853, he was not identified with the politically dangerous Kansas-Nebraska dilemma. His age (he was sixty-five in 1856) was acceptable to many Democrats who anticipated a more mature approach to the nation's problems than had been provided by the younger Pierce. And, because of his age, he would probably want to serve only one term, thereby forcing the young, up-and-coming stalwarts such as Douglas and Breckenridge to put off their own presidential ambitions for only four years.

Perhaps the *Pittsburgh Morning Post* (April 3, 1856) summed up his qualifications as well as any: “Mr. Buchanan stands clear of all the late vexing controversies. He is unexceptionable in his moral character. His ability and statesmanship none can doubt. He is a national man equally acceptable to both North and South” So the decision was made even before Buchanan had left England; John Slidell of Louisiana, one of his most persistent backers, told him, “... make up your mind, my dear Sir, that the cup will not be permitted to pass from you, & endeavor to bear your cross with as much patience as you can command.” After seventeen ballots at the Cincinnati national convention, Buchanan was nominated (over Pierce, Douglas, and Cass) and ran against John C. Fremont, the candidate of the newly formed Republican Party, and Millard Fillmore, nominee of the American Party. After conducting an essentially front-porch campaign, Buchanan won a majority of the electoral vote (but not of the popular vote) in the November election, and four months later began a hectic and crisis-filled presidential term.

THE HUMAN CONDITION

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SATURDAY PAINTING

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