

James Buchanan—Diplomat, International Statesman, President

Address of Hon. Robt. L. Owens, ex-Senator of Oklahoma, upon
James Buchanan, delivered at said unveiling exercises.

Mr. Chairman and my fellow citizens:

IT GIVES me great pleasure to join with you in paying a tribute of respect to the memory of a great American, James Buchanan, who lived and died in Lancaster County, surrounded by those who ardently admired and loved him. He was born on April 23, 1791, on Dunwoodie Farm near Cove Gap, Pa., the son of an immigrant from Donegal, Ireland. His father was educated, wise, of great force of character; his mother, whom he regarded the chiefest blessing of his life, was a devout Christian, studious, industrious, instructive, devoted. Both parents were Scotch-Irish and Presbyterians.

He graduated in Dickinson College, was admitted to the Bar November, 1812, at the age of 21.

Elected to Legislature

In October, 1814, he became a member of the Pennsylvania Legislature from Lancaster County, and at once took an active and distinguished part. He was reelected in 1816, and gave evidence of a high sense of sound statesmanship. After two terms as Legislator he withdrew and devoted himself to the law at which he made a distinguished success, reaching great distinction.

On December 9, 1819, the death of Anne C. Coleman, to whom he had been affianced, proved a life tragedy to him, and he remained loyal to her memory till the day of his death, thus exhibiting evidence of extraordinary sincerity, tenderness, and loyalty.

In the Fall of 1820 he was elected to the Congress of the United States, and immediately became one of its leading debators, exhibiting a moderate and just judgment, and proving to be one of the most active and useful members of the National Legislature. He was reelected in 1822, in 1824, in 1826, and 1828, thus serving ten years in the House of Representatives of the Congress of the United States, becoming Chairman of the most important committee of the Judiciary. At the close of the fifth Congress in which he had served, Mr. Buchanan determined to withdraw from the public service and devote himself entirely to the Bar for which he was perfectly adapted by learning, industry, reasoning power, perfect integrity, and a most pleasing address.

His Pennsylvania admirers put his name forward for the vice-presidency without his consent, and it was his intention to decline this honor, when unexpectedly he was urged to accept the position of Minister plenipotentiary of the Russian Empire which, as a matter of public duty, he did taking the place of John Randolph of Virginia.

Sent to Russia

The Senate of the United States confirmed him unanimously in January, 1832. The acceptance of this public duty and leaving a free and happy country to live in a country like Russia, governed as a despotism, gave him no joy, and he only accepted the post on the ground that he should not be expected to remain over two years, within which time he accomplished the purpose of his mission and obtained the, at that time, extraordinary accomplishment of a commercial treaty with Russia, which that government was refusing to other nations. It required the highest form of diplomacy for Mr. Buchanan to accomplish this in which it was necessary to overcome internal Russian opposition and a previous refusal.

It was only through the complication with Great Britain that prevented Mr. Buchanan from also obtaining a recognition of the principle—"Free ships make free goods." While Mr. Buchanan was dealing with the Russians whose theories of government were political antipodes, he used such tact, sagacity and skill that when he left Russia the Czar of Russia astonished him by embracing him warmly and expressing his appreciation of his services there, and conveying through him to America assurance of his good will.

During his absence, South Carolina, in November, 1832, declared void the tariff act within its borders. President Jackson, on December 10, 1832, denounced this nullification by proclamation. In January, 1833, a force bill was introduced to coerce South Carolina. In the meantime, President Jackson had vetoed a bill renewing the United States bank charter, so that when Mr. Buchanan arrived in the United States in November, 1833, he had to meet the gravest problems which had ever arisen in America during that century. He returned in November, 1833, and was elected to the United States Senate on December 6, 1834, when Clay and Webster were leading the majority of the United States Senate against Andrew Jackson, with Senator Wright, of New York, and Senator Benton, of Missouri, leading the forces supporting President Jackson.

Defends Andrew Jackson

When he entered the Senate he defended Jackson's demand on the French to pay what they owed. His patriotic speeches upon this question eventually contributed to a peaceful settlement with the French, and avoided war.

In January, 1836, he made a very great speech defending the right of petition against John C. Calhoun, who moved to refuse to receive a petition because it was anti-slavery. This did not mean that Mr. Buchanan favored slavery. He was opposed to slavery, but he was not willing that the White men of the North and the White men of the South should kill each other over this question which he expected nature would adjust in due time as the Negro race grew in intelligence and justified freedom.

In December, 1836, he defended Senator Benton's resolution to expunge the Senate resolution previously passed, condemning President Jackson for withdrawing Federal deposits from the United States Bank. This was one of the greatest arguments ever delivered in the Senate—based on reason, logic, and a spirit of moderation and justice. He made many brilliant, logical and effective addresses in the Senate, especially in relation to the admission of Michigan, the affairs of Texas, Federal interference with elections, the relations of the states to the United States, the constitutional powers of the Federal executive, on the banking question, on the tariff. He easily held his own in debate with Webster and with Clay. In December, 1842, he was elected the third time to the United States Senate. In 1844 his friends insisted on urging him for the presidency, but he did not permit it as he regarded it as inexpedient at that time.

While still in the Senate—in February, 1845—he made an address favoring the admission of Texas as one of the states of the Union.

Mr. Buchanan became Secretary of State under President Polk in 1845, and it was during his service that some very great events transpired. The admission of Texas into the Union; the War with Mexico; the treaty with Mexico; fixing the boundaries of Texas, and taking over that vast territory now comprising the states of New Mexico, Arizona, and California. It was under Mr. Buchanan that the line 54° 40' was established between the United States and Great Britain as the result of a diplomacy which required the greatest possible force of character and skill of management, and which led to the recognition of that vast territory now comprising the states of Washington, Oregon, etc.

Acquires Territories

These vast services have almost been lost sight of in the flight of time, and probably because so soon after Mr. Buchanan's great services to the country the Civil War arose which made men lose sight of everything else for many years, but now that time has passed and we take a calm review of the history of America, we find this splendid American leading the way for the acquisition of these vast territories that comprise almost a third of the area of the United States, and yet it was a peaceful acquisition except in the case of the War with Mexico which was brought about by the folly and aggression of the Mexican Government.

Under the advice of Mr. Buchanan, President Polk, on December 2, 1845, in a message to Congress, expanded the Monroe Doctrine by declaring it against the Policy of the United States for any European colony or dominion to be established in North America, and thus was ended an attempt by Great Britain to colonize California, and interfere with the affairs of Texas and Mexico.

The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty which was passed by the succeeding administration on July 4, 1850, was in disregard of the views of Mr. Buchanan, and gave Great Britain undesired recognition as to Central America and laid a foundation for probable future friction between the United States and the British Government.

It was due to this unfortunate treaty that Mr. Buchanan was almost compelled, as a matter of duty, to accept the position of Minister plenipotentiary to the British Government with special authority to settle pending questions, and particularly to obtain a satisfactory interpretation of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty.

Goes To Great Britain

He accepted the mission on the understanding he should not be required to remain over two years, within which time he undertook to bring about a more satisfactory interpretation of the rights of the United States and to limit the rights of Great Britain in relation to the Western Hemisphere.

In accepting this mission he showed great unselfishness and nobility and sense of delicacy. For instance, he was unwilling to accept this high post until he had the assurance that it would not diminish in any way the quota of appointments from the State of Pennsylvania to which that state would be otherwise entitled. He was not willing to stand in the way of the preference of any of his friends from Pennsylvania. He accepted this mission to Great Britain only as a matter of duty, leaving England in March, 1856.

He was nominated at Cincinnati for the Presidency by the Democratic National Convention in June, 1856, without any previous organization or campaign which was the highest testimony of his extremely high standing among the representatives of the Democracy.

One of the great issues of the times was the so-called Missouri Compromise in 1850, in which it was provided that the territory should be free from slavery. Mr. Buchanan was opposed to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, so-called, and favored letting each state settle slavery for itself. He disliked the fanaticism shown by those who advocated abolition, believing that this should be left to the processes of time.

But, when the Nebraska-Kansas settlement occurred he regarded it as a fortunate solution of the slavery controversy because by that settlement "Congress was neither 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."

Unfortunately, this was not the end of the controversy, and Mr. Buchanan in vain urged the discouragement of the agitation of abolition which he feared would lead to bloodshed and danger to the white race in the South.

Birth of Republican Party

This controversy gave birth to the Republican Party of 1856, and one step after another brought about the Civil War.

When Kansas presented the LeCompton constitution providing for slavery, Mr. Buchanan favored the admission of the state notwithstanding this provision in the Constitution which at once subjected him to the violent hostility of the ultra-anti-slavery advocates and he was denounced as if he favored slavery which he did not. He was deeply opposed to slavery, but thought it a less evil as a temporary matter than the destruction of the white race in a fratricidal war over that subject. He justly pointed out that the advocates of slavery had become the aggressors in overthrowing the Missouri Compromise, and promoting the Nebraska-Kansas substitute, which thus endeavored to transfer slavery to the North.

Men are apt to forget that Mr. Buchanan was elected on a platform which made it inevitable for him to accept the Kansas constitution because the platform had expressly declared that the people of each state should have the authority to make their own constitution and not have it dictated by the Federal Government.

He wanted the people of Kansas to settle this question by ballots and not by bullets.

Takes Oath of Office

When Mr. Buchanan was inaugurated he did a very remarkable thing. He solemnly declared that in taking the oath of office he had determined not to be a candidate for renomination so as to free himself from all bias or ambition, and to have no motive except the desire to serve the country well and to live in the grateful memory of his countrymen.

James Buchanan was a man of splendid appearance, gracious manners, of great social charm, a man of great integrity, courage and loyalty, a man sensitive to the rights of others, of great intellect, of great attainments, of great character, and a great president. In social life he was genial, brilliant, and attractive, with a charming personality, unexcelled as a conversationalist.

He was an able lawyer. Above all he was a noble public servant, and developed into a diplomat of the highest order. For four years he was a member of the Pennsylvania Legislature; for ten years he was a member of the House of Representatives of the Congress of the United States. He was three times elected to the Senate of the United States. He was Minister plenipotentiary to Russia. He was Minister plenipotentiary of the United States to Great Britain. He was Secretary of State, and he was President of the United States.

Held Important Trusts

Probably no man ever held in American history a series of such important trusts and it is impossible to find higher evidence of the confidence of his contemporaries than the position to which he was called, and for which it was clearly evident that he was often yielding to the demand of duty rather than to the motive of ambition.

Every office that James Buchanan ever occupied he filled with honor and distinction. I think we do well to come today to Lancaster County and to pay a just tribute of praise to the memory of this very great and noble American.

No adequate review of his life is possible in the few minutes permitted on an occasion such as this. Only an epitaph and a few words to sketch his brilliant career is possible. Those who knew him best admired him most, and James Buchanan was not the less a very great man because the Civil War which immediately followed his service absorbed public attention and made men forget that it was under James Buchanan that Texas and New Mexico and California and Washington and Oregon and Idaho and Utah and Nevada were added to the United States.

And James Buchanan was none the less a great American because he tried in vain to prevent the bloody fratricidal war which followed his presidential term. It was to his everlasting credit that he tried to reconcile the people of the North and of the South.

It was an irreconcilable conflict which ought to have been solved as it was solved in Brazil, and in Great Britain—by peaceful processes. If only the wisdom of men had been able to reconcile and adjust the differences between the North and the South by peaceful processes, how much more glorious would have been the advancing power of the people of the United States, but the obduracy of the contending parties can never take away from James Buchanan the honor to which he is entitled as a great public servant who loved his fellowmen and gave a life of intense devotion to their service.

War Retards Civilization

The Civil War put back the civilization of America for over half a century, but as we review the history there arises in greater honor the worth of James Buchanan, the great American, the great public servant who, like the Mennonites of Lancaster County, loved peace and believed in the Prince of Peace. I am pleased to be permitted to join with you today in paying my modest tribute of praise and admiration to this forever glorious and honorable son of Lancaster County. This splendid son of the magnificent Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and of America!

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