

---

## In Defense of Doughface Diplomacy

A Reevaluation of the Foreign Policy of James Buchanan

JOHN M. BELOHLAVEK

In his recent Pulitzer Prize–winning study of the early American republic, *What Hath God Wrought*, Daniel Walker Howe easily distinguishes the forces of good from the forces of evil. Two visions contested each other for the heart, mind, and future of nineteenth-century America. The Whig view embodied technology, factories, urbanization, and immigration—a partnership between business and government to build railroads and canals—in a word, “progress.” The competing view, represented by the Democrats, reflected an older, simpler time of independent farmers, with or without slaves, seeking to extend their dream of the Jeffersonian republic spanning the continent. Paradise appeared as a well-plowed field, loving family, and sturdy cabin mirrored in the waters of a still pond. While ultimately, of course, Whiggery has prevailed in the twenty-first century, Howe deeply regrets the shortsightedness of Americans in more broadly choosing the Democratic over the Whig vision in the antebellum era.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not Americans ultimately made the “right” choice to opt for a place in the line at a Lowell mill over a sixty-acre farm, certainly many politicians of the era knew the critical nature of geographic expansion—not only for U.S. security, but also to keep alive an economic and social dream embraced by most Americans. Andrew Jackson, John Tyler, James K. Polk, Franklin Pierce, and certainly James Buchanan acted upon this phenomenon. Should Americans settle in California or Cuba, Nebraska or Nicaragua, millions believed that the destiny of America might send the eagle soaring over the Caribbean, Central America, and even out into the Pacific.

The intention of this essay is not to attack or defend James Buchanan on the issue of the drift toward civil war. Instead, the objective is to reexamine several major aspects of his diplomacy in the light of their aims, triumphs, and failures and to argue that his policies, actions, and sound judgment often benefited the nation. Even those instances of failure reflected a genuine and realistic concern for American security and commercial goals that would be pursued by later administrations.

Historian Robert May has pointed out that presidential success is often related to timing. Polk, for example, settled troubling domestic problems connected to the tariff and banking in 1846 without having them hinder the primary goal of his presidency, Manifest Destiny—the continental expansion of the United States into the Northwest and Southwest. With impeccable timing, Polk triumphed, and the nation benefited mightily at the expense of Mexico and Great Britain. Buchanan, his secretary of state, attempted a similar course of action, but in a markedly different era.<sup>2</sup>

Much had changed in America in the decade following the Mexican War. The year 1857 was not kind to “Old Buck.” Quelling a rebellion of hostile Mormons required a military expedition. Meanwhile, sectional tensions heightened, agitated by fugitive slaves and the passions of “Bleeding Kansas.” The president hoped to allay the concerns of his Southern constituents by the passage of the strikingly low (17 percent average) Hunter tariff of 1857 as well as meddling in the now infamous Supreme Court *Dred Scott* case. That decision infuriated Yankees of all stripes. Domestic matters became even more troubled when the economy crashed in the fall in a “panic” for which Buchanan had no remedy.

“The Sage of Wheatland” had never been a master of domestic policy. His legendary blunder in calling for the daily wage of an American workingman to rival that of his European counterpart—a dime!—earned him the unflattering sobriquet “ten-cent Jimmy.” No wonder the president hoped to focus the nation’s attention on foreign affairs. His party shared that view. The 1856 platform demanded that the “sacred principles” of the Monroe Doctrine be applied with “unbending rigidity.” The Democratic Party also pledged itself to “insure our ascendancy in the Gulf of Mexico.” To further that end, the later 1860 platforms of both Northern and Southern Democrats endorsed the concept of the acquisition of Cuba on terms “honorable to ourselves and just to Spain.”<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, Buchanan dedicated very little of his inaugural address to foreign policy. Content to mouth platitudes about never interfering in the domestic concerns of another country unless motivated by “the great law” of self-preservation, he emphasized that Americans’ history forbade the nation from adding future territory unless sanctioned by “the laws of justice and honor.” Such brevity was replaced by detailed discussions of foreign affairs, which consumed more than half of his annual messages to Congress in 1858 and 1859.<sup>4</sup>

The rising Republican Party contested Buchanan at every turn. Antebellum Republicans have fared much better in the eyes of historians than have Democrats. Even those scholars who embrace the notion of a “blundering generation” that led us into Civil War find more “blunderers” among the Democrats than among the Republicans. Perhaps too often, scholars have dwelled upon the uprightness of the Republicans of the 1850s. They chose the moral high road of antislavery, but their rigid path on expansion could only end in secession. Meanwhile, historians have sometimes marginalized the Democrats, especially the so-called doughfaces, who sought compromise and desperately wanted to preserve the country.

Buchanan attempted to rejuvenate Manifest Destiny—to refill old wine into new bottles in an effort to advance the Democratic vision of America, expand the commercial and physical boundaries of the nation, save the Union, and perhaps even add luster to his presidency. While a combination of foreign and congressional resistance limited his success, he should receive recognition for his efforts. Importantly, too, Buchanan almost alone deserves credit (or blame) for his course of action. He complained to British foreign secretary Lord Clarendon that he felt obliged to give his personal attention to matters of the least importance. Unfortunately, the responsibilities of the president had increased twenty-fold and were “now so onerous that no man can very long bear the burden. There must be some change [he lamented]; but innovation is the difficulty.”

Clearly, shifting those burdens to the secretary of state was not an option. Few would maintain that Lewis Cass determined strategy. Roy Franklin Nichols observed that “senility was creeping up on the obese, indolent Lewis Cass,” who was “worse than useless.” Most historians concur. Cass’s recent biographer is more flattering. While acknowledging that Buchanan made policy, Willard Klunder emphasizes that the two men agreed on

most issues and the secretary of state was more than a figurehead. Perhaps so. Accordingly, an examination of several problems will help define the Buchanan presidency in foreign affairs.<sup>5</sup>

### Latin America and Great Britain

The Monroe Doctrine, first asserted in 1823, was under fire in the 1850s from the Spanish, English, and French, each of whom saw territorial or commercial prospects in the Western Hemisphere—Spain in the Dominican Republic, England in Central America, and France in Haiti and Mexico. Congress had declined to respond to a possible European threat in the Yucatán in 1848, but Buchanan reacted to a very minor transgression in remote Paraguay in 1858. When Paraguayans fired upon an unarmed American naval vessel charting the waters of the Parana River, a sailor was killed. This incident in combination with the arbitrary seizure of property held by Americans in the country prompted the president to demand action. Congress approved the appropriation of \$1,350,000 to purchase five steamers to be utilized in an expedition against Paraguay, and the president forthwith dispatched a commissioner accompanied by a fleet of nineteen ships of two hundred guns manned by twenty-five hundred sailors and marines. Clearly, this was overkill against a landlocked nation, although it did produce the desired results of prompt concessions from Asunción.

Jean Baker, however, contends that this was “a ludicrous assertion of American power,” and Elbert B. Smith caustically notes, “no insult, real or implied, against the U.S. escaped Buchanan’s attention. . . . No significant trade developed with Paraguay and the expedition probably cost several hundred thousand dollars, but American honor was vindicated.” Instead, it could be reasoned that by sending a fleet to highly visible Montevideo, Uruguay, Buchanan delivered a message asserting American sea power and commercial interests to an audience of Latin Americans and European diplomats. While not exactly the “Great White Fleet” of Teddy Roosevelt, the intended meaning was parallel.<sup>6</sup>

Buchanan had to contend with the omnipresence of Great Britain in Latin America. As the United States sought to extend itself territorially and commercially, the Mighty Lion continually reared his massive head. “Old Buck” was no stranger to the intrigues and nuance of Anglo-American relations. While serving as U.S. minister to London prior to his

presidency, he had befriended the powerful Lord Clarendon, who acted as foreign secretary through the spring of 1858. Their relationship produced a number of intimate and revealing letters in which Buchanan candidly chided his comrade about topics ranging from the British occupation of India (“it could be improved”), the Crown’s protégés in Central America (they should be kept “in better order”), and any denial of American access across the isthmus (“To this I shall not submit”). Amid Anglophobic denunciations, especially in the Senate, of British imperialism, Buchanan sounded the cry of reason and mutual benefit. He predicted to Clarendon, “there’s a better day-a-coming” in Anglo-American relations. “The material interests of both [nations] are essentially involved in the welfare of the each other; & according to the old Scotch proverb, ‘blood is thicker than water.’ This will shew itself some day.”<sup>7</sup>

In the meantime, Buchanan held the line on three key issues. First, in Central America, the United States had signed the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850, an accord that many Americans, including Buchanan, felt obligated the Crown to abandon its possessions in Honduras and Nicaragua. The British government took exception, claiming the treaty only committed them to take no *additional* land. While they would not agree to abrogate the recent pact, which Buchanan desired, the English did negotiate treaties with Honduras (November 1859) and Nicaragua (January 1860) that conceded some territorial sovereignty back to the Latin Americans.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, the great “Pig War” in the American Northwest almost produced a transatlantic conflict. On June 15, 1859, Lyman Cutler, an American farmer, shot and killed a boar rooting out his well-tended potato patch. The animal belonged to the Hudson’s Bay Company, which also held land on jointly occupied San Juan Island, off the coast of Vancouver. In spite of Cutler’s apologies, both sides took the issue seriously. Oregon commander General William Harney overreacted, landing a company of troops under Captain George Pickett in July (to save the Americans’ bacon). With tempers flaring and the possibility of the British sending Royal marines ashore, Buchanan faced yet another potential crisis. He defused the San Juan crisis by removing General Harney from command and dispatching Winfield Scott as a peacemaker. While the issue remained unresolved until after the Civil War, scholar Scott Kaufman praises the president’s calm demeanor and sound judgment: “he [Buchanan] deserves credit for wading through a potential storm of troubles.”<sup>9</sup>

## The Slave Trade

Third, tensions also arose over the Royal Navy's repeated searches of vessels purportedly engaged in the African slave trade that flew the U.S. flag. The practice of "search and seizure" played out very prominently in Anglo-American relations. Although Congress banned the international trade to the United States in 1808, the traffic had continued illegally to the South and legally to Spanish Cuba. Recognizing the unwillingness of Washington to permit the search of American vessels by European navies, many slavers hid their cargoes within the folds of the Stars and Stripes. The Anglo-American Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842 provided a compromise that committed the United States to post ships totaling a minimum of eighty guns off the coast of Africa to restrict the trade. Either from an absence of dedication to the principle or perhaps due to an inadequate maritime force, administrations from Tyler through Pierce had generally failed to meet the obligation. Unscrupulous captains and merchants took advantage of the situation with as many as eighty-five vessels fitting out for the nefarious traffic in New York harbor between February 1859 and July 1860.<sup>10</sup>

Early in his political career Buchanan personally found slavery offensive—in 1826 he referred to it in a speech in Congress as a "great political and a great moral evil"—and thanked God that the institution did not exist in Pennsylvania. Slavery, however, did not especially exercise Buchanan. He viewed slavery as rather benign and considered blacks generally as "well fed, well clothed, and not overworked." They were treated with "kindness and humanity." Like chief executives before him, whether out of political or constitutional considerations, he ignored the broader issue. The mounting evidence of the illicit international slave trade demanded his attention, however, and Buchanan responded, ushering in a rather dramatic change in American policy. In his December 1859 annual message he argued against the reopening of the trade and lamented its negative impact on African society and civilization. He identified the Cuban market as the chief culprit, and while he still cast an envious eye on the island, there existed a "Christian and moral" concern about the notion of the illegal commerce.<sup>11</sup> Historian Robert Ralph Davis says that Buchanan did more than raise moral objections as a matter of conscience; he acted in a practical manner.

He centralized the enforcement of the slave trade legislation in the hands of the Department of the Interior and urged an increase in congressional appropriations for the navy. His perpetuation of “a largely successful effort to perfect naval enforcement of the laws demonstrates Buchanan’s genuine desire to end the African slave trade to the United States.”<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, the navy and the Buchanan administration became more aggressive and opportunistic than their predecessors when dealing with the issue. Still, the five U.S. naval vessels plying the African coastline were too few, too old, and too slow to do much damage to slavers sailing smaller, faster craft. For example, the *Echo*, a brig carrying some 475 slaves (almost 150 died en route), had sailed from West Africa in the summer of 1858 but was captured by the USS *Dolphin* off the coast of Cuba on August 21. The Africans were brought to Charleston, South Carolina, and placed in the custody of U.S. Marshal Daniel Hamilton. Buchanan became personally involved and ordered the marshal, a physician, to properly care for the slaves. On October 8 they sailed back to Africa aboard the USS *Niagara* under the auspices of an agent of the Colonization Society, arriving a month later at Monrovia, Liberia. Sympathetic judges and juries, however, found both the captain and the crew of the *Echo* not guilty in trials in Charleston and Key West in 1859.<sup>13</sup>

In late November 1858 the yacht *Wanderer* arrived off Jekyll Island, Georgia. Built in New York in 1857, the fast (twenty knots), luxurious ship could outrun almost any vessel on the high seas. Within a year, she had been sold and re-outfitted on Long Island. The activity prompted an investigation by federal officials, who suspected the conversion would produce either a ship conducive to filibustering or slave-running. When nothing incriminating was discovered, Captain William Corrie sailed the *Wanderer* to Charleston, where he declared his intention to continue on to his Trinidad plantation.<sup>14</sup>

The ship next appeared in October 1858 off the African coast, where, even with some 350 slaves aboard, she easily outran the USS *Vincennes*, which could make only half her speed. Six weeks later, the slaver arrived near privately owned Jekyll Island and landed her cargo during the night. While the slaves were quickly disbursed to plantations in the area, rumors filtered into Savannah and the event was widely reported in local newspapers. The *New York Times* reprinted columns of the *Albany Statesman*,

*Savannah Republican*, *Augusta Chronicle*, and *Edgefield (S.C.) Advertiser*, all of which recounted the *Wanderer's* voyage while attacking the legality of the slave trade and opposing its renewal in the South.<sup>15</sup>

A prompt investigation by U.S. Attorney Joseph Ganahl in Savannah produced the arrest of the captain and the seizure of the ship. Buchanan and Attorney General Jeremiah Black lent their support, urging that the perpetrators and the slaves should be identified and apprehended. In February 1859 a federal judge ruled that the *Wanderer* had been engaged in the illegal traffic and was henceforth forfeit to the U.S. government and would be sold at auction.<sup>16</sup> The captain and crew of the *Wanderer* enjoyed the same Southern sympathy as their brethren aboard the *Echo*. Trials were held, but by mid-1860 an exasperated Attorney General Black and the federal judge in Charleston indicated they wanted the charges to be dropped.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile in the autumn of 1859, the eighty-six-foot-long, copper-hulled, two-masted schooner *Clotilde* succeeded in reaching Mobile Bay with a cargo of about 116 Africans purchased in Ghana in May. Federal authorities had learned of the voyage and were prepared to seize the vessel upon its arrival in Alabama. A cautious Captain William Foster landed at night at Twelve Mile Island and transferred the slaves to their potential masters before his ship could be discovered. The evidence—the *Clotilde*—was summarily burned and sank. Although the federal government attempted to prosecute the vessel's owner, Tim Meaher, the case was dismissed out of court; the charges of "importing Africans for the purpose of slavery" could not be proved. Besides, when the case arrived in court in the spring of 1861, Alabama had seceded from the Union and the state was no longer under federal law. This incident was arguably the last known successful attempt to bring slaves into the United States illegally.<sup>18</sup>

Certainly, the voyages of the three vessels reopened the ugly scar of the international slave trade. The issue became hotly political. While Southerners denied their support and claimed adherence to the law, the *New York Times* offered a conspiracy theory: perhaps a small but vigorous band of radicals was intentionally embarking on the trade to unite the North and elect a Republican as president in 1860.<sup>19</sup> Such a choice would guarantee secession. New York senator and White House aspirant William Seward seized the moment—and the stage—by introducing a resolution

calling for “the number and character of American vessels engaged in the trade with Africa” and demanding the chief executive’s correspondence relative to the case of the *Wanderer*.<sup>20</sup>

Buchanan knew that although the number of slavers had not spiraled out of control, the issue posed both a domestic political problem and an embarrassment in relations with Great Britain. The administration newspaper, the *Washington Union*, mirrored Buchanan’s viewpoint. Some Southerners were either sympathetic or turned a blind eye to the slave trade. Since federal authorities could do little once the blacks had been landed, action must be taken “to suppress the traffic wholly on the high seas, where their jurisdiction is complete.” Consequently, the government moved by 1859 to strengthen the U.S. Navy by adding four steamers in the Caribbean off Cuba, introducing faster steamers of war and eight more vessels to the African squadron, and cooperating with the British as a tactic to halt the slave trade. The strategy bore fruit: eighteen ships were seized as slavers in 1860 and twelve were prosecuted—a dramatic increase over the total of twenty-four ships taken in the previous three years of the Buchanan administration.<sup>21</sup>

To ensure that his strategy worked, the president dispatched Benjamin F. Slocumb, an Interior Department agent, to travel the entire South secretly for two months in September–November 1859 to investigate the extent of the foreign slave trade. Slocumb scoured Dixie and heard rumors of the *Wanderer*’s blacks, but informed Washington that “since the landing of the *Wanderer*, there is no convincing evidence that any other landing of Africans has been effected upon our southern coast.” Apparently, word of the *Clotilde* had not reached Slocumb. Buchanan felt comfortable, however, informing Congress in his 1860 annual message that no additional Africans had been landed since 1858 and that the government was effectively pursuing its mission to end the trade. Even so, skeptical Republican Henry Wilson of Massachusetts introduced a Senate resolution in March 1860, seeking an inquiry into whether the treaty with Great Britain to suppress the traffic had been executed and whether any further legislation was necessary on the subject. Ultimately, in the three critical situations that emerged with Whitehall in the late 1850s, Buchanan’s approach redounded to the advantage of the United States.<sup>22</sup>

## Southern Expansion: Cuba and Mexico

Buchanan the expansionist expressed territorial interest in both Cuba and Mexico. Given its strategic location and lucrative commerce, Cuba had been a target of the United States dating back to the early 1800s. The Southern pulse quickened when the Spanish added more than 165,000 slaves to the island in the late 1830s. Buchanan had moved in 1857 to make inquiries in Madrid about the possible sale of Cuba. No luck—apparently the Spanish were not interested. New minister William Preston of Kentucky was instructed, however, to try to utilize \$30 million to “facilitate negotiations.” Concurrently, in his second annual message of December 1858 Buchanan noted the unpaid property claims—\$128,000—owed U.S. citizens by Spain generally related to Cuban-based violations. Cuba “in its existing colonial condition” was “a constant source of injury and annoyance to the American people.” The slave trade had caused serious tensions between the United States and Great Britain over the right of search and promoted chaos in Africa itself. The trade would “instantly disappear,” the president promised, if the island were ceded. “We would not, if we could, acquire Cuba in any other manner.”<sup>23</sup>

Buchanan compared the purchase of Cuba to that of Louisiana from Napoleon in 1803, noting that neither possession was of as great a value to the European power as to the United States. Congress promptly followed up in January 1859 with Louisiana senator John Slidell proposing \$30 million to commence the negotiations. We can assume that a larger sum, possibly as much as \$150 million, would have been in the offing. Slavery quickly became the consuming issue, however, and Republicans relentlessly attacked the measure in both houses. After lengthy, spirited debate, Slidell acknowledged defeat and withdrew the bill in late February. This debate was as close as the president would come to success. He recommended the purchase of the island briefly in his succeeding 1859 and 1860 messages, but must have known that the idea had no future, particularly in the Republican-dominated House of Representatives.<sup>24</sup>

The case can be made that Buchanan had a reason for his aggressive posture (some might claim “obsession”) with Cuba. Carving out several additional slave states from the island would clearly boost the South’s declining base in Congress and perhaps stabilize the shaky Union. Politically, annexation might reunite a Democratic Party divided between



Figure 4.1. *Map of Central America: Compiled from Materials Furnished by the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate of the U.S.* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Coast Survey, 1856).

proslavery and popular sovereignty wings. Economically, the “Pearl of the Antilles” continued to be of major economic import to the entire United States, constituting a major market for American goods and producing sought-after coffee, tobacco, and sugar. Finally, U.S. presidents from Jefferson to Kennedy warned of foreign influences in Cuba and the danger those forces might pose to American security should the island fall into the wrong hands or pursue its own course unchecked. Lest we forget—in April 1861 Republican secretary of state William Seward wrote to Abraham Lincoln boldly suggesting the possibility of hostilities with Spain and France. The Spanish had just annexed Santo Domingo, and the French

posed a threat to Mexico. The secretary intended to rekindle Southern patriotism and hoped to persuade the seceded states to rejoin the Union. Such action might have, additionally, resulted in the annexation of Cuba or a U.S. naval base in the Caribbean. The ill-conceived scheme received an immediate and chilly response from the president. However, Seward reiterated in 1867 to the new Spanish minister with the colorful name of Fecundo Goni the view that Cuba would eventually by “means of constant gravitation . . . fall into the U.S.” In the meantime, Washington would look with disfavor upon any transfer of Cuba to a European power.<sup>25</sup>

Buchanan had advocated the purchase of Cuba as early as the 1830s. Of course, the South would benefit from its acquisition, but arguably so would the nation. The United States opted simply to control the island in the twentieth century more indirectly through the Platt Amendment and a protectorate policy, or more recently, an embargo.<sup>26</sup>

Concurrently, Buchanan eyed parts of northwest Mexico—the provinces of Chihuahua and Sonora largely bordering on Arizona and New Mexico. The chaotic political situation south of the Rio Grande pitted Benito Juarez’s “Constitutional Party” against a military regime led by General Miguel Miramon (whose execution with Emperor Maximilian can be seen in an 1867 painting by Eduard Manet). The disorder not only led to depredations against American lives and property in northern Mexico but prompted fears of European intervention—by the Spanish or particularly French emperor Napoleon III. Buchanan, who sympathized with the Juaristas, repeatedly asked Congress for American troops to establish a protectorate and help stabilize the situation in the north. He declared in his annual message of 1859, “as a good neighbor, shall we not extend to her a helping hand to save her? If we do not, it would not be surprising should some other nation undertake the task, and thus force us to interfere at last, under circumstances of increased difficulty.” Weary of Manifest Destiny and skeptical of Buchanan’s rhetoric, Congress refused the president’s requests. Likewise, Congress declined to act on the McLane-Ocampo Treaty of December 1859, which granted the United States transit rights to build a railroad or canal and, in the event of civil unrest, offered Washington limited rights of intervention into Mexican domestic affairs.<sup>27</sup>

The president ultimately proved prophetic. In 1865, Seward demanded a French withdrawal from Mexico under the language of the Monroe Doctrine and dispatched an army of fifty thousand veterans to the border to

help convince Napoleon of his point. Slavery was not the issue in Mexico as it was in Cuba. The Mexicans had abolished the institution, and Southerners were skeptical of its prospects there. Perhaps Buchanan convinced himself that his expansionist motives profited Mexicans and Americans. By advocating the principles of the Monroe Doctrine, U.S. and Mexican security, and a trans-isthmian route, he might indeed help both nations.

Nicaragua was never a target of Buchanan's expansionist notions (like Cuba, northern Mexico, or even Alaska) but formed a core element in a broader strategy to advance U.S. commercial and strategic influence in the region. The president remained concerned about the "weak and feeble states" of Central America, subject to internal strife and European influence. Neither alternative suited a United States that hoped to secure the hemisphere for republicanism, develop a trans-isthmian route to the Pacific coast, and enhance trade and settlement in the region.<sup>28</sup>

Filibusters jeopardized that vision through their repeated incursions into Cuba and Nicaragua. William Walker confirmed the worst nightmares of many Latinos about Yankee aggressors seeking to dominate their countries—nightmares encouraged, of course, by the Europeans. Walker's multiple invasions—1855, 1858, and 1860—were indeed launched from the United States and initially received national support. By 1858, the "grey-eyed man's" proslavery posture had cost him some backing above the Mason-Dixon Line. Regardless, President Buchanan steadfastly opposed Walker's adventurism, denouncing filibusters in his speeches and issuing a special proclamation on October 30, 1858, urging Americans to deny Walker their endorsement. Some historians remain skeptical. They cite Buchanan's criticism of Commodore Hiram Paulding, who arrested Walker on the coast of Nicaragua in 1858, as evidence of his encouragement of the famous filibuster, or at least the president's Southern sympathies.<sup>29</sup>

Robert May has thoroughly analyzed the incident and persuasively makes the case that the reprimand reflected issues of territorial sovereignty and not filibustering. Moreover, May contends that "there was never any doubt that the administration wanted filibustering stopped." And as for serving as a tool for Southern interests, May writes we can accuse Buchanan of many things, but "we can at least acquit him of the charge that he was a mere lackey of the slave power." While the Central Americans may have continued to regard Yankees with some suspicion, the Buchanan administration worked to halt filibustering and to negotiate treaties with

Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Honduras. As he admonished the Senate, “The Government of the United States can never permit these [trans-isthmian] routes to be permanently interrupted, nor can it safely allow them to pass under the control of other rival nations.”<sup>30</sup>

## Alaska

Perhaps the most unknown flirtation with expansion under Buchanan involved his interest in Alaska. The Russians began exploring the region in the 1740s, and the fur trade drew permanent settlements a half-century later. After their defeat in the Crimean War in 1856, however, they became increasingly fearful of losing their North American colony to the expansionistic Americans. As the czar’s officials sought to shift imperial priorities to China, St. Petersburg pondered how to divest itself peacefully of Alaska and gain some diplomatic or financial benefits in the process. The Russians knew that they could not defend Alaska against the might of an English fleet or a determined neighbor. Even so, American inquiries during the Pierce administration met with a sharp rebuff. But by 1857, attitudes shifted as Czar Alexander II’s younger brother, Grand Duke Constantine, advocated the sale. He emphasized that the United States could take Alaska at will and, besides, the colony was of little practical benefit. Strong disagreement was expressed on the latter point.<sup>31</sup>

The Americans had already made significant inroads into the territory. U.S. fur traders had been a powerful force in the Northwest since the early 1800s. By 1838, St. Petersburg protested the activity of Yankee whalers and merchants along the Pacific Coast, demanding that Washington restrain them under the provisions of a treaty negotiated in 1824. The federal government did little to assuage the Russian demands until 1845. Secretary of State Buchanan wanted to ensure Russian neutrality in any potential conflict with Great Britain and thus agreed to issue an order restricting the activity of American vessels along the Alaska coastline.

When the Whigs regained the White House in 1849, however, they quickly reversed the policy—no wonder, given the profits involved. The 1850s was the heyday of the whaling industry, and more than five hundred New England vessels annually plied the cold waters of the northern Pacific off the Russian coast. The bowhead whales captured in the region contributed significantly to the total of over \$89 million of whale

products imported into the United States during the decade, far surpassing the \$70.6 million garnered in the 1840s. San Francisco merchants also covetously eyed the Alaska trade and organized the American-Russian Commercial Company in 1851 for that purpose. Well organized and well funded, the company began its first imports—250 tons of ice—the following year. The amount quickly increased to over 3,000 tons per annum, supplemented by quantities of coal and fish. In turn, the firm became a major supplier of foodstuffs and finished goods to Alaska.

Neither Russian traders nor the czar was happy with these incursions, but they recognized that the rise of Yankee whaling and their own commercial shortcomings provided the opportunity for the Americans. Alexander II formally granted the trading privileges. The aggressiveness of the administrations of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore, especially under the guidance of Secretary of State Daniel Webster, reflected the seriousness of the American claim to a commercial place on the Pacific coast. The cession of Alaska might be only a matter of time and circumstance.<sup>32</sup>

Over the course of the next four years, the drama played out as more “liberal” elements in St. Petersburg maintained the practical advantages of the sale, including improved relations with the United States. The “conservatives” wanted to assist the struggling Russian-American Company in profiting from commerce along the Pacific coast and were in no hurry to relinquish the territory. In December 1857 the discussion warmed as Russian minister Baron E. A. De Stoeckl reported a conversation with Buchanan in which the rumor of the immigration of a large number of Mormons to Alaska was discussed. The minister sought confirmation, but the president only smiled and remarked, “How to settle this question is your worry; as for us, we would be very happy to get rid of them.”<sup>33</sup>

Such rumors only confirmed the wisdom and necessity of the sale in the mind of Grand Duke Constantine. As he admonished the czar, “there is no doubt that they [the United States] will seize our colonies, and even without much effort.” The Russians were well aware of American ambitions, using terms such as “Manifest Destiny” and the “Monroe Doctrine” in their correspondence. Still, they dragged their feet, waiting for the Americans to make the first move. This occurred in the winter of 1859–60 when California senator William Gwin and Assistant Secretary of State John Appleton broached the subject with De Stoeckl. Clearly, Buchanan saw the benefits that would accrue to California and Oregon by acquiring additional

empire on the Pacific and instructed his agents to inquire about Alaska in an informal fashion. If the Russians were open to the sale, the president could then proceed to discuss the matter with both the cabinet and Congress. Gwin suggested that \$5 million might be suitable compensation, and while De Stoeckl remained noncommittal on the sum, he insisted that the Americans formally open negotiations.<sup>34</sup>

De Stoeckl's report to St. Petersburg endorsed the American offer, although the minister cautioned that it would be difficult to resolve the matter given the frenzied state of American politics and the possibility of disunion. Minister of Foreign Affairs A. M. Gorchakov, who no doubt mirrored the opinion of the czar, read the dispatch warily; he remained reluctant to sell Alaska, especially at a price he determined did not reflect the "true value" of the territory. Besides, the government did not want to ruffle the feathers of the Russian-American Company, whose privileges in the region would expire in 1862. As a result, De Stoeckl was instructed to tell the Americans that the possible sale would be placed on hold. A disappointed Gwin admitted that the tarnished Buchanan administration was unlikely to gain additional funds from Congress, and the subject was tabled. An America divided by Civil War was unprepared for further negotiations, but in 1867, Secretary of State William Seward seized the moment and the colony at the somewhat elevated cost of \$7.2 million. As historian Victor Farrar has emphasized, the movement to sell Alaska in the 1850s was premature. The Russians had no pressing need to dispose of the territory, and key figures within the government were "lukewarm" to the idea. Even so, the discussions held during the Buchanan administration laid the groundwork and prompted the Russians to think more seriously of a sale—especially to the United States. The talks also reaffirm the president's openness to acquire territory and markets that might be of benefit to the nation.<sup>35</sup>

### East Asian Commerce

Buchanan's interest in the Pacific did not stop at the waterline. During his term agents concluded agreements with both China and Japan intended to expand American trade, if not territory. Although the United States had a commercial treaty with China negotiated at Wanghia in 1844, revisions of such items as additional open ports, reduced tariffs, and religious

freedom needed to be addressed. In July 1857 the president dispatched an old comrade and fellow Pennsylvanian, William B. Reed, to handle the assignment. Upon his arrival, Reed found the Chinese in yet another painful military conflict with the English and French. By June 1858 the Europeans had predictably triumphed, and the Americans shared in the benefits of a new round of Chinese concessions, including access to the desired ports, a most-favored-nation clause, and religious liberties for foreigners. In 1859 Reed brought the Treaty of Tientsin home to Washington, where the Senate and a grateful president echoed their approval. Chinese ratification took a bit longer as new American diplomat John E. Ward's refusal to kowtow to the emperor complicated the situation.<sup>36</sup>

To the east, Commodore Matthew Perry had "opened" Japan in 1854, but his treaty of peace and friendship did not include a commercial entente. Franklin Pierce sought to rectify that omission the following year when he dispatched merchant Townsend Harris to secure a new pact. Harris proved to be an excellent choice and along the way negotiated a treaty with Siam as well as an agreement with Japan signed in 1857. The emperor added an interesting twist, however, by requesting that several princes carry the treaty to America for the exchange of ratifications. Although their journey was delayed until February 1860, eighteen officials and their sixty servants sailed for Washington, D.C., aboard a naval steamer, the USS *Powhatan*, on a trip paid for by the U.S. government.<sup>37</sup>

The delegation arrived on May 15 amid great pomp, fanfare, and fascination that engulfed the wider populace as well as government officials. The ladies of capital society, decked out in their finery, exerted special efforts to see and be seen with the Oriental visitors—much to the embarrassment of the latter. Buchanan received the delegation in a packed East Room of the White House on May 18 at the commencement of the tour. One reporter noted being drowned in a sea of lace and crinoline and overwhelmed with the smell of perfume. In a brief, half-hour ceremony, the president focused on the anticipated benefits of mutual peace and commerce shared by both nations. The Japanese had brought fifteen boxes of presents for the chief executive, including several exceptional rifles and a magnificent tea set delicately inlaid with gold and pearls.

For six weeks, the Japanese were indeed treated royally, and given high-profile tours of Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. Each city attempted to outshine the other in an effort to impress the princes, who

seemed more interested in textile factories than theater. No doubt their inability to speak any English limited their curiosity about the arts. While the Americans relentlessly carted them about to various parades, parties, dinners, and demonstrations, the royals generally handled each situation with patience and grace. The press, which reported each move of the Japanese to their readers on a daily basis, praised the visitors for their long suffering and blasted the Americans for their rudeness and incivility.

The *New York Times* likely spoke for many Americans, however, when it editorialized about the departure of the Japanese on June 30. "It may seem discourteous, but we cannot help saying we are glad they have gone. Their visit with us has not been without a certain interest to us, but we have had enough of it. . . . Their social intercourse with us has not been especially fascinating. . . . The truth is, the Japanese came to acquire knowledge, not to impart it." The *Times* sagely analyzed the intellect and ingenuity of the Japanese and predicted that they would profit from their observations of American factory operations and weapon designs. Mistrusting their intentions, the paper cautioned "We can only hope that we may not find ourselves among the earliest victims of our over-zealous and mistaken benevolence." Both the administration and the press realized that the princes had been dispatched to the United States to determine whether this part of Christendom could contribute to Japanese learning and was worthy of the island's commerce. Buchanan could only hope that he and his countrymen had passed the test. Predictably, the Civil War portended a dramatic decline in American trade with the Orient. The much-coveted export market did not pass the 1860 level of \$8 million until the 1880 figure of a modest \$11 million. As for Asian imports, they remained far more lucrative, bouncing back more quickly, and almost doubling from \$29 million in 1860 to \$55 million two decades later.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

In sum, Buchanan sought to advance established principles and goals of his party and his government: additional land and commercial opportunity for American farmers and merchants (Cuba, Mexico, and Alaska); a transit across Mexico or Central America to facilitate that trade, as well as treaties with China and Japan to promote Oriental commerce; the Monroe Doctrine to remove the existing European presence from the Western

Hemisphere and foster security and commerce in Central/South American (Paraguay) and the Caribbean; and national honor with Great Britain relating to rights of search and seizure and San Juan Island. He did so with some success. But his failures doomed the Jacksonian vision of perpetual growth and expansion for the farmer. Following the war, Americans turned inward. The Homestead Act helped settle the Great Plains, and industrialization produced the flooding of cities with immigrants from rural Iowa and rural Italy, small-town Pennsylvania and small-town Poland.<sup>39</sup>

Certainly, Buchanan embraced many of the elements of racism, cultural arrogance, and Anglo-Saxon superiority common to those formulating American foreign policy into the twenty-first century. Likewise, his objectives, his wider goals, were wedded to an older and more nationalist vision of Manifest Destiny and mission. He held a lonely vigil, pursuing ideas whose time had come and gone. Those ideas, however, would arise phoenix-like in the next generation, led by William Seward as the harbinger of the “New Manifest Destiny” of the 1880s. Nearly two decades ago, Frederick Moore Binder, the leading authority on Buchanan’s diplomatic career, maintained that we should look beyond his failing and flailing on the domestic front and grant “justice” to his foreign policy. That time may be now.<sup>40</sup>

## Notes

1. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

2. Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny’s Underworld: Filibusters in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 216.

3. Kirk H. Porter and Donald Bruce Johnson, eds., *National Party Platforms, 1840–1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 23–26, 30–31.

4. James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, vol. 5 (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1917), 430–36.

5. J. Buchanan to Lord Clarendon, March 27, 1858, in John Bassett Moore, ed., *The Works of James Buchanan, Comprising His Speeches, State Papers, and Private Correspondence*, 12 vols. (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960), 10:199; Roy Franklin Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York: MacMillan, 1948), 90; Willard Klunder, *Lewis Cass and the Politics of Moderation* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1996), 288–89; Elbert B. Smith, *The Presidency of James Buchanan* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1975), 68; Jean H. Baker, *James Buchanan* (New

York: Times Books, 2004), 107–8; Frederick Moore Binder, *James Buchanan and the American Empire* (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 1994), 222–25.

6. Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 259–61; Baker, *James Buchanan*, 111–12; E. B. Smith, *Presidency of James Buchanan*, 74; Philip S. Klein, *President James Buchanan: A Biography* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), 323–24; George Ticknor Curtis, *The Life of James Buchanan*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1883), 224–26; James Buchanan, “First Annual Message to Congress,” in Moore, *Works of James Buchanan*, 10:145; “Second Annual Message to Congress,” *ibid.*, 262–63; “Third Annual Message to Congress,” *ibid.*, 348–49; James Buchanan, *Mr. Buchanan’s Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion* (New York: D. Appleton, 1866), 264–67. A recent thoroughgoing analysis of the Paraguayan expedition that reveals Buchanan’s nationalist intentions can be found in Gene A. Smith, “A Most Unprovoked, Unwarrantable, and Dastardly Attack: James Buchanan, Paraguay, and the Water Witch Incident of 1855,” *Northern Mariner* 19 (July 2009): 269–81.

7. Clarendon to Buchanan, March 13, 1857, April 15, 1858, in Moore, *Works of James Buchanan*, 10:114–15, 207–8; Buchanan to Clarendon, September 9, 1857, March 27, 1858, *ibid.*, 122–23, 199.

8. Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 229–39; E. B. Smith, *Presidency of James Buchanan*, 69–71; Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 318–21; John M. Belohlavek, *George Mifflin Dallas: Jacksonian Patrician* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 1977), 165–73; Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan*, 2:213–14; Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 54–55; Buchanan, *Mr. Buchanan’s Administration*, 260–63; “First Annual Message,” in Moore, *Works of James Buchanan*, 10:142–45; “Second Annual Message,” *ibid.*, 246–49, 257–62; “Fourth Annual Message,” *ibid.* 11:26–27.

9. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 325; Scott Kaufman, *The Pig War: The U.S., Britain, and the Balance of Power in the Pacific Northwest, 1846–1872* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004), 82; Buchanan to Clarendon, November 3, 1859, in Moore, *Works of James Buchanan*, 10:336–37; “Third Annual Message,” *ibid.*, 350–52.

10. Robert Ralph Davis Jr., “James Buchanan and the Suppression of the Slave Trade, 1858–1861,” *Pennsylvania History* 33 (October 1966): 448.

11. Buchanan, “Congressional Speech on the Panama Mission,” April 11, 1826, in Moore, *Works of James Buchanan*, 1:202–3; “Third Annual Message,” December 19, 1859, *ibid.*, 10:345–46.

12. Robert Ralph Davis Jr., “Buchanan Espionage: A Report on Illegal Slave Trading in the South in 1859,” *Journal of Southern History* 37 (May 1971): 271–72.

13. Tom H. Wells, *The Slave Ship Wanderer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967), 38, 50–51; *Harper’s Weekly*, December 25, 1858, *New York Times*, April 20, 1859. Buchanan’s personal involvement with the *Echo* Africans is detailed in Davis, “Suppression of the Slave Trade,” 451.

14. *New York Times*, June 11, June 12, July 8, 1858. Also see Eric Calonijs, *The Wanderer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006).

15. *New York Times*, December 14, 17, 21, 31, 1858. One paper suggested that the *Wanderer* did not carry slaves itself but rather served as a pilot ship or a decoy for a much larger vessel. *Harper's Weekly*, December 25, 1858, January 8, 15, 1859. Sailors in the African squadron had miserable duty, serving for two years with little relief and, because of the threat of disease, little shore time. *New York Times*, May 24, 1859.

16. Wells, *Slave Ship Wanderer*, 36–39; Calonijs, *The Wanderer*, 150–51; *New York Times*, January 4, 1859.

17. Calonijs, *The Wanderer*, 186–220.

18. James Lockett, "The Last Ship That Brought Slaves from Africa to America: The Landing of the *Clotilde* at Mobile in the Autumn of 1859," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 22 (Fall 1998): 159–63. For a study of the fate of those who landed, see Sylviane A. Diouf, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007).

19. *New York Times*, December 28, 1858.

20. *Ibid.*, January 15, 1859; *Harper's Weekly*, January 29, 1859.

21. *New York Times*, December 22, 1858, May 24, 1859. The administration already evidenced a more aggressive policy, arresting the bark *Ardennes* at Jacksonville on suspicion of being a slaver. *New York Times*, December 20, 1858. The five steamers purchased for the Paraguay expedition were shifted to the Africa squadron. Davis, "Suppression of the Slave Trade," 452–54.

22. *Harper's Weekly*, March 24, 1860; Wells, *Slave Ship Wanderer*, 86–87. Account should be taken of the president's efforts in terms of the moral and humanitarian dimension of his foreign policy. Historian Davis cautions, however, that the Democrats sought political advantage, too, by demonstrating they were capable of ending the slave trade. Davis, "Suppression of the Slave Trade," 458–59.

23. Buchanan to Christopher Fallon, December 14, 1857, in Moore, *Works of James Buchanan*, 10:165; Buchanan, *Mr. Buchanan's Administration*, 258–60; Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan*, 2:222–24; Buchanan, "Second Annual Message," in Moore, *Works of James Buchanan*, 10:249–53; Buchanan, "Third Annual Message," *ibid.*, 358–59.

24. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 324–25; Robert E. May, *Southern Dream of Caribbean Empire* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 163–89; E. B. Smith, *Presidency of James Buchanan*, 77–78; Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 251–59.

25. John Bassett Moore, *The Digest of International Law* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1906), 456; Allan Nevins, *War for the Union: The Improvised War* (New York: Scribner, 1959), 62–64; John Taylor, *William H. Seward* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 152; Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood*, 68–69; W. Seward to A. Lincoln, April 1, 1861, in *The Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, vol. 6 (New York: Francis D. Tandy, 1904), 234–36; Lincoln to Seward,

April 1, 1861, *ibid.*, 236–37. The Spanish annexed the Dominican Republic from 1861 to 1865, and the French occupied Mexico from 1862 to 1866. Pressure from Seward following the Civil War was a significant factor in the withdrawal of both European powers.

26. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 324.

27. Buchanan, “Second Annual Message,” in Moore, *Works of James Buchanan*, 10:253–57; Buchanan, “Third Annual Message,” *ibid.*, 353–59; Buchanan, “Fourth Annual Message,” *ibid.*, 11:32–34; E. B. Smith, *Presidency of James Buchanan*, 75–77; Baker, *James Buchanan*, 108–9; Klunder, *Lewis Cass*, 290; Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan*, 2:215–22; Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 321–23; May, *Southern Dream of Caribbean Empire*, 154–62; Buchanan, *Mr. Buchanan’s Administration*, 267–76; Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 247–51.

28. Buchanan, “First Annual Message,” in Moore, *Works of James Buchanan*, 10:142; Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 263–64, addresses the attempted Alaska purchase.

29. May, *Manifest Destiny’s Underworld*, 217–18; Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood*, 156–61; Baker, *James Buchanan*, 110; E. B. Smith, *Presidency of James Buchanan*, 73–74; “Mr. Buchanan’s Proclamation Concerning an Expedition against Nicaragua, October 30, 1858,” in Moore, *Works of James Buchanan*, 10:230–32; Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 239–45.

30. Robert E. May, “James Buchanan, the Neutrality Laws, and American Invasions of Nicaragua,” in *James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s*, ed. Michael J. Birkner (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 1996), 123–40; May, *Manifest Destiny’s Underworld*, 124–27, 160–61, 268–69; May, *Southern Dream of Caribbean Empire*, 114–35; Robert E. May, “The Slave Power Conspiracy Revisited: United States Presidents and Filibustering, 1848–1861,” in *Union and Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era*, ed. David Blight and Brooks D. Simpson (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997), 11, 22–28; Buchanan “Treaty with Honduras and on Inter-oceanic Transit,” to the Senate, April 5, 1860, in Moore, *Works of James Buchanan*, 10:413.

31. Nikolay N. Bolkhovitinov, “The Crimean War and the Emergence of Proposals for the Sale of Russian America, 1853–1861,” *Pacific Historical Review* 59 (February 1990): 16–34.

32. Howard I. Kushner, *Conflict on the Northwest Coast: American-Russian Rivalry in the Pacific Northwest, 1790–1867* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1975), 92–105, 119–20. The whaling trade suffered mightily when oil was discovered in Pennsylvania in 1859 and cheaper kerosene began to replace whale oil in lamps across America.

33. Bolkhovitinov, “Crimean War,” 35–36.

34. *Ibid.*, 37–40; Kushner, *Conflict on the Northwest Coast*, 135–38.

35. Bolkhovitinov, “Crimean War,” 41–49; Victor J. Farrar, *The Annexation of Russian America to the United States* (1937; New York: Russell and Russell, 1966), 1–14.

Elbert B. Smith suggests that Buchanan might have been successful if he had offered the \$7.2 million to the Russians in 1859, but his commitment to obtain Alaska was much weaker than his interest in Cuba. E. G. Smith, *Presidency of James Buchanan*, 72.

36. Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 264–68. Additional concessions came within the year, including the abolition of the kowtow, when the French and British renewed their attacks on China. The United States remained neutral but profited from the European demands. Reed, a Democratic Party activist, had been state attorney general and a history professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

37. *Ibid.*, 268–69.

38. *Ibid.*, 269–70. *Harper's Weekly*, May 26, June 2, June 23, 1860; *New York Times*, May 10–June 30, 1860. Export and import data can be found in the U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, 1789–1945* (Washington, D.C., 1949); *Foreign Trade*, 251.

39. Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 226–27.

40. *Ibid.*, 273–76.