

## **James Buchanan's Response to Lincoln's Election**

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The presidential election in November 1860 began a tension-filled four month period in which Republican Abraham Lincoln was president-elect, but the nation was still being led by the lame-duck Democrat, President James Buchanan. Buchanan's goal was to prevent the secession of the slave states, at least until after he would leave office in early March 1861.

Born in Pennsylvania in 1791, Buchanan had had a long public career, including service in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, as Secretary of State, and as minister to Great Britain. Despite his northern roots, Buchanan proved sympathetic to the southern causes of advancing slavery in the territories and of opposing any restrictions on the institution. As such, he was one of a group of northern politicians referred to disparagingly as "doughfaces" for their willingness to be pliable and to support the south.

Nominated for the presidency by the Democrats in 1856, Buchanan had won a three way race against Republican John C. Fremont and American Party candidate Millard Fillmore. That contest reflected the fractured nature of American politics, with Buchanan winning the south along with several northern and Midwestern states, while the newly-formed Republican Party put up a strong showing, winning eleven northern states and demonstrating its ability to perhaps elect a president four years later. Buchanan quickly displayed his southern sympathies, and he encouraged as president-elect the Supreme Court to take up the Dred Scott case, which infuriated northerners by declaring unconstitutional the part of the Missouri Compromise that limited the expansion of slavery into portions of the lands acquired by the Louisiana Purchase. He also

moved aggressively to support pro-slavery factions in Kansas, and to push for its admission into the Union as a slave state.

Not a candidate for reelection in 1860, Buchanan watched the Democratic Party split into two factions and go down to defeat at the polls to its Republican rival. Talk of secession in South Carolina began almost immediately, and the president hoped to keep that state in the Union and to avoid the possibility of secession from spreading to the other slave states. Of immediate concern was the future of the several Federal fortifications in Charleston and whether in the event of secession state authorities might move to occupy them. Several days after Lincoln's election, Buchanan held a cabinet meeting to discuss "the threatening aspect of affairs in the South, and most particularly in South Carolina." He asked Attorney General Jeremiah Black for opinions on the president's legal authority to deal with issues such as the protection of public property, the collection of import duties, and the enforcement of Federal laws in the event that state officials refused to do so. On the thorny question of the possible use of United States troops, Black informed Buchanan that they could not be used until some overt act had been committed by South Carolina authorities.

In early December, the U.S. Congress convened in Washington, and Buchanan sent to the representatives his State of the Union message. He blamed the crisis on the north's "long-continued and intemperate interference" on the slavery issue, which "has at length produced its natural results." He urged southerners, however, to remain calm, at least until the president-elect might commit some overt act. "Secession," he warned, "is neither more nor less than revolution." Buchanan requested congress, or the various states, to call for a new constitutional convention, which he hoped might propose an amendment that would guarantee the rights of slaveowners in the states where slavery currently existed, as well as allowing the institution to

exist in the territories until popular sovereignty determined their status as free or slave states, and protect the rights of slaveowners to have their fugitive slaves returned to them. If ratified, it would have been the Thirteenth Amendment. Ironically a far different Thirteenth Amendment would be adopted five years later, ending slavery in the United States.