


*James Buchanan*  
*15th President*




Terms: 1857-1861

Political Policy: Democrat

First Lady: Harriet Lane (niece)

Vice President: John C. Breckinridge

Overview

Born: April 23, 1791, in Stony Batter, Pennsylvania... Buchanan presided over the dissolution of the Union. His faith that the legal system would resolve the slavery issue locked him into inaction. Most historians blame Buchanan for hastening the greatest crisis in American history... Died: June 1, 1868.

The Era

- Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Felix Mendelssohn's *Wedding March*, and Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* published (1857, 1858, 1859)
- Queen Victoria and Buchanan exchange the first official transatlantic telegraph message (1858)
- Radical abolitionist [John Brown](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/index.html) <[www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/index.html)> leads a raid on a federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry; he is apprehended and hanged (1859)
- Construction of the Suez Canal begins (1859)

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## Domestic Policy

At his inauguration, Buchanan made his position clear: states should decide the legality of slavery within their borders. Two days later, the Supreme Court handed down a decision on a slave named Dred Scott, who argued that his residence in a free state made him a free man. The court disagreed, claiming that Scott was a piece of [property](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/bonus-video/lincolns-washington/) without the rights of citizenship. One implication of the court's decision was that slavery could not be excluded from any U.S. territories. Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 as an opponent of slavery's expansion prompted South Carolina and six other states to secede and form the Confederacy while Buchanan was still in office, before Lincoln was even inaugurated. The lame duck Buchanan tried to appease the South to no avail.

## Foreign Affairs

With his hands full at home, Buchanan's foreign policy was limited to attempts to influence the Americas. Efforts to annex Cuba derailed because the island would surely have entered the Union as a slave state. An American named William Walker was arrested for establishing a dictatorship in Nicaragua but Walker claimed to be acting as Buchanan's agent and was freed. American ships maneuvered Britain away from claims to American colonies and ground troops massed on Mexico's northern border. All of these clumsy coercive activities increased international enmity towards the United States.

*“It is the imperative and indispensable duty of the Government of the United States to secure to every resident inhabitant the free and independent expression of his opinion by his vote.”*

— James Buchanan, 1857

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## Presidential Politics

"I had hoped for the nomination in 1844, again in 1848, and even in 1852, but now I would hesitate to take it. Before many years the abolitionists will bring war upon this land. It may come during the next presidential term." Buchanan's work as a diplomat had kept him out of the country as the issue of slavery roiled the nation. His clean record and general support for states' rights as a reflection of the will of the people allowed him to defeat the Republican John Frémont in the 1856 election. Pledged to serve only one term -- and eager to vacate the White House before civil war became a reality -- Buchanan's antagonistic relationship with Stephen Douglas split the Democratic Party, allowing the Republican [Abraham Lincoln](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/presidents-lincoln/) to win handily in 1860.

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