From his mansion, known as Wheatland, near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, James Buchanan reigned as one of the most successful politicians of his age. His elegant home came to symbolize a man for whom appearances were all-important. Ever since his college days, when he was expelled for drunkenness and insolence, he determined that his public reputation would from then on be impeccable.

From the same generation as Martin Van Buren, Buchanan was learned and ambitious and possessed an extraordinary memory. He had been elected five times to the House of Representatives, had astutely read the times during the rise of Andrew Jackson, and had shifted political parties to become a Democrat. “I distinctly recollect [how a] Senator . . . urged me to change my party name,” Buchanan later recalled. “In that event he said he would venture to predict that, should I live, I would become President of the United States.”

In 1832 he was named Andrew Jackson’s minister to Russia. Though to Buchanan his overseas ministry was tantamount to banishment, it turned out to be a political godsend, keeping him out of the country during a heated period in which his career in Congress might easily have been cut short. He served in the Senate during Van Buren’s administration, and in 1844 he made his own bid for the presidency. When he lost the nomination to fellow Democrat James K. Polk, he reluctantly accepted the position of secretary of state. But he detested working for a man he considered his inferior.

“My life is that of a galley slave,” he wrote. “I have to do the important drudging of the administration without the power of obtaining offices for my friends. . . . I have no power. I feel it deeply.”

Critics noted his careful self-promotion and how he regularly shifted his position on controversial issues. He opposed tariffs one minute, free trade the next. He was for unregulated banking, and then against it. President Polk wrote, “All his acts and opinions seem to be with a view to his own advancement.” But he was also a strong believer in maintaining ties between North and South. “Disunion,” he once said, “is a word which ought not to be breathed amongst us even in a whisper.”

By the 1850s, having survived four decades in politics, Buchanan was hailed as the only man who could hold the country together. And in 1857, under the shadow of a new capitol building still under construction, he was inaugurated the country’s fifteenth president. “I have no other object of earthly ambition,” he wrote privately, “than to leave my country in a peaceful and prosperous condition.”

In contrast to Van Buren, Buchanan was tall, his large head topped by graying blond hair. He was a meticulous dresser; some even called him a dandy. And since one eye was nearsighted, he often tilted his head, which some thought an intimate gesture while others were certain it was a sign of deceit. He was a man of contradictions: a learned expositor of the Constitution, he was dignified and shrewd, but he was also stiff and self-seeking and almost utterly humorless. One friend said, “I do not think he ever uttered a genuine witticism in his life.”
The only president never to marry, in the absence of a first lady he turned to Harriet Lane, an orphaned niece whom he had earlier adopted. “I feel that it is not good for a man to be alone,” he wrote, “and should not be astonished to find myself married to some old maid who does not expect from me any romantic affection.”

But in reality Buchanan had no intention to marry, ever since an engagement years earlier had ended in tragedy. Back in 1819, when his wealthy fiancée, Ann Coleman, heard rumors that he was interested in her only for her money, she had angrily broken off the engagement, and then suddenly and mysteriously died. Whether it was suicide was never determined, but Ann’s father was convinced that Buchanan was responsible and had called him a murderer. In his grief, Buchanan had written him a plea. “You have lost a child, a dear, dear child. I have lost the only earthly object of my affection. . . . I have now one request to make; . . . deny me not. Afford me the melancholy pleasure of seeing her body before interment.” The twenty-eight-year-old’s letter was returned unopened. He was banned from the funeral and ostracized by his townspeople. For the rest of his life, Buchanan was overly cautious and fatalistic in almost everything he attempted.

But the last thing America needed in 1857 was timidity or fatalism. What it needed was a president who could boldly face the nation’s problems and bridge the widening chasm between North and South. What it had instead was a Northern president deeply inclined toward Southern interests, including slavery. “My election so far as I was personally concerned, was a very small matter,” Buchanan wrote. “But . . . the right of the people of a territory to decide the question of slavery for themselves, was a subject of vast importance. . . . The Constitution . . . expressly recognizes the right to hold slaves as property.”

Even before his inauguration Buchanan had made a damaging mistake. When the case of the captured slave Dred Scott came to trial at the Supreme Court, Buchanan had secretly and improperly contacted Justice Robert Grier of Pennsylvania and convinced him to vote the pro-slavery line. It was the work of a cunning politician, but it would backfire. In the court’s ruling against Scott, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney pronounced that blacks were not citizens of the United States and were “so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” Though Buchanan got what he wanted in the Dred Scott decision, his action virtually ensured that there would be civil war.

The Dred Scott decision was followed by a crisis in Kansas, where Buchanan’s backing of a pro-slavery state government helped set off bloody fighting. Then, on October 17, 1859, abolitionist John Brown seized the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and called for a massive slave uprising. Although the revolt was put down by federal troops, John Brown—through his capture, trial and execution—ignited the land. “On the day of Brown’s execution,” Buchanan noted, “bells were tolled in many places [in the North] as if he were a martyr. . . . [T]his inflamed the Southern mind with intense hostility against the North, and enabled the disunion agitators to prepare it for the final catastrophe.” With political pressure mounting against him, all Buchanan wanted was to get out of office peacefully and leave the nation’s problems to somebody else. But though he refused to run for another term in 1860, he also refused to support the leading candidate of his party, Stephen A. Douglas, thereby splitting the Democrats and guaranteeing a Lincoln victory in the fall. It was then that the disastrous final months of Buchanan’s administration began.

“From . . . December 1860 . . . until March 4, 1861 . . . was by far the most important period of [my] administration,” he wrote. “No public man was ever placed in a more trying and responsible position.”
Following his lifelong pattern of avoiding conflict, Buchanan came out on both sides of the issue. Secession was unlawful, he said, but then he backed off. "The question fairly stated is: Has the Constitution delegated the power to coerce a State into submission which is attempting to withdraw from the [Union]? . . . After much serious reflection, I have arrived at the conclusion that no such power has been delegated."

As civil war marched steadily closer, it was charged that the president was deliberately harboring traitors within his government. His secretary of war, John B. Floyd, of Virginia, was accused of ordering shipments of arms from Northern arsenals to be sent south. "It is true that . . . Floyd made the attempt," Buchanan blasted back. "But I arrested the order . . . before a single gun was sent. . . . The charges against me . . . were abhorrent."

On December 20, 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union. Buchanan threw up his hands and said there was nothing more he could do. From this point on, Congress ignored his leadership. His political power and influence were finished.

In the end he was vilified, considered a traitor by both North and South. His portrait, hanging in the Capitol rotunda, was taken down to prevent it from being defaced. "When I parted from the Executive Mansion," Buchanan later recalled, "I said to President Lincoln: 'if you are as happy, my dear sir, on entering this house as I am in leaving it and returning home, [then] you are the happiest man in this country!'"

On March 4, 1861, James Buchanan went home to his Pennsylvania plantation. "I . . . often warned my compatriots of the dangers which surrounded us," he wrote. "I shall carry to my grave the consciousness that I at least meant well for my country." History would label him as cowardly, weak, senile, and vacillating. In truth, he was a lonely, limited man who mistook politics for statesmanship.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

1861–1865
Politics with a Purpose

If James Buchanan represented the professional politician unable to cope with great events, his successor came to stand for the exact opposite. Yet for twenty-six years Abraham Lincoln was as concerned as Buchanan was with his own political advancement. "No man knows, when that presidential grub gets to gnawing at him," he once admitted, "just how deep it will get until he has tried it."

Brought up in rural Indiana, Lincoln was required by his father to perform what he called "the roughest work a young man could be made to do." With a strong distaste for manual labor, he launched out on his own and began attracting attention in Illinois. He was friendly, he was honest, and he was a beguiling storyteller. And he soon began to take an interest in local politics. "Every man is said to have his own peculiar ambition," he wrote in his first political address. "I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed by my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem."