

**THE POLITICAL CRISIS
OF 1861. A REPLY TO
MR. BLAINE**

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The political crisis of 1861. A reply to Mr. Blaine by Christopher Stuart Patterson

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CHRISTOPHER STUART PATTERSON

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U.S. History - Civil war

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POLITICAL CRISIS OF 1861.

A REPLY TO MR. BLAINE,

BY

CHRISTOPHER STUART PATTERSON.

PHILADELPHIA:
PORTER & COATES.
1884.

THE published chapter of Mr. Blaine's book deals with that crisis in the history of the country which culminated in civil war. The distinguishing characteristic of Mr. Blaine's literary workmanship is in his directness of appeal to his reader's sympathies and prejudices. His point of view is that of the advocate and not that of the judge, and that portion of his book which has been given to the public is a printed oration and not an historical essay. Yet were his subject less important, and were his style less attractive, his words would command attention, because of popular appreciation of the brilliant certainties of his past, and popular interest in the still more brilliant possibilities of his future.

Mr. Blaine's conclusion is that Mr. Buchanan could, by prompt and vigorous action, have suppressed the rebellion, and changed the course of history; and he necessarily bases this conclusion upon the assumption that the lawful exercise of executive authority would have crushed the revolt in its incipiency. That assumption involves a misapprehension of the relative powers of the legislative and executive departments of the government of the United States, a misunderstanding of the actual condition of public affairs in the latter part of 1860 and early part of 1861, and an inadequate appreciation of Mr. Buchanan's clearness of perception and earnestness of purpose.

Mr. Blaine does no more than justice to the purity, he does less than justice to the strength, of Mr. Buchanan's character. Stripped of all rhetorical forms of expression, and plainly stated, his estimate of Mr. Buchanan is, that he was a conscientious but timid man, who was habitually influenced by the stronger minds of those with whom he came in contact. It is true that this estimate differs from that which was for a long time the popular impression of Mr. Buchanan's character, only in that it gives him credit for integrity of purpose; yet a careful study of the actual condition of public affairs in 1860 and 1861, and a dispassionate view of the difficulties which beset Mr. Buchanan's administration in its closing days, ought to convince any one that Mr. Buchanan is entitled to a higher measure of consideration than that which Mr. Blaine has accorded to him.

Fortunately the materials for the formation of an accurate judgment with regard to the policy and the action of Mr. Buchanan's administration are within the reach of every man, for those materials are to be found, not only in the journals of Congress, in the Presidential messages and other State papers of the day, in Mr. Buchanan's published account of his administration, and in the memoirs and letters of other active participants in the great events of that time, but also in those lately published volumes in which Mr. George Ticknor Curtis has, with historical accuracy, with adequate fullness of detail, and with a judicial impartiality, as admirable as it is rare among

biographers, told the story of Mr. Buchanan's life. He who considers and weighs this mass of evidence will not fail to conclude that the Mr. Buchanan of history is a very different person from the timid old man, honest but infirm of purpose, and devoid of moral vertebræ, that Mr. Blaine's canvas presents to us.

Mr. Buchanan came of that Scotch-Irish stock, which, combining in varying proportions the perseverance, caution, and self-reliance of the Scottish, and the enthusiasm, sympathy, and unselfishness of the Irish character, has given to England many of her great soldiers and statesmen, and has furnished to the United States no inconsiderable proportion of the brain as well as of the bone and sinew of its population. Called to the bar in 1812, he had rapidly achieved distinction, and his professional success was attested by the entries in his fee book, by the character of the causes in which he was retained, and by his successful advocacy of those causes. In public life he had won, in speedy succession, the little and the great prizes of political ambition. After a term of preliminary service in the lower House of the Legislature of Pennsylvania, he had been from 1821 to 1831 a representative in Congress; from 1831 to 1833 minister to the court of St. Petersburg; from 1834 to 1845 a Senator of the United States; from 1845 to 1849 the Secretary of State in the Cabinet of President Polk; and from 1853 to 1856 minister to England. In 1856 he had been selected as the standard-bearer of his party, because he was

universally recognized as the ablest representative of that party's principles, and in 1857 he became the President of the United States.

In Congress Mr. Buchanan studied the subject of discussion with the same care with which he prepared his cases at the bar. He almost always spoke at the latest possible stage of the debate, thus enabling himself to take advantage of the errors and omissions of previous speakers, and his reported speeches are well reasoned arguments from which nothing is omitted which could serve to explain and vindicate the view he advocated. Year after year he joined issue in debate with Webster, Clay, Clayton, and the many other able men who were the consistent opponents of Democratic doctrines. With them he discussed great questions upon broad grounds of constitutional authority and political expediency, and he maintained the independence of his judgment against their persuasive reasoning. In the Cabinet, and at the courts of Russia and of England, he was called to shape and to present the national policy as affecting the relations of the country to foreign states; he negotiated a commercial treaty at St. Petersburg; he stated with precision and maintained with firmness the position of the United States with regard to its north-western boundary; in the complications growing out of the misconstruction of the Clayton-Bulwer treaty, he asserted the Monroe doctrine in relation to South American affairs with a vigour that might well command the sympathy and challenge the admiration

of Mr. Blaine; and by the discovery that "the simple dress of an American citizen" is the ordinary evening attire of a gentleman with the addition of a sword, he, while doubtless laughing in his sleeve, accomplished, with a more than diplomatic gravity, the pacific settlement of that momentous controversy as to the proper garb of a Republican representative accredited to a monarchical court, which Mr. Secretary Marcy had provoked as the first step in a sartorial propaganda of Democratic doctrines. No one, who fails to study the dispatches which Mr. Buchanan wrote when Secretary of State and Minister to England, can do full justice to his ability, for in moderation of tone, in clearness of statement, and in logical accuracy of reasoning, they are models of diplomatic communication.

Yet Mr. Buchanan could not claim to rival Horace Walpole or Lord Chesterfield as a letter writer. Few readers of the many and lengthy letters which Mr. Curtis prints will be likely to concur in the biographer's approval of their literary merits. Mr. Buchanan in private intercourse wrote too often, too rapidly, and too carelessly to write well. Many as are the letters which Mr. Curtis prints, they constitute but a small part of Mr. Buchanan's epistolary efforts. No more voluminous letter writer ever lived. Mr. Curtis does not state it, but it is a fact well known to those who were Mr. Buchanan's political associates and adherents, that one means by which he created and increased his influence in his

party, was by the writing of private letters, not only to leaders in national, state, or municipal politics, but also to politicians of lesser note. Those letters flattered the recipients, and, passing from hand to hand, they made Mr. Buchanan's name a household word throughout the country. The man, whose ambition nerved him to devote hours of every working-day to the writing of such practical epistles, had no time to waste on the graces of style, the refinements of sentiment, or humorous turns of expression.

Mr. Buchanan had entered public life as a member of the Democratic party; to its favour he owed all the offices he held; and by its votes he was placed in the Presidency. For the greater part of seventy years that party had controlled the government of the United States. It had maintained against the centralizing tendencies of the Federal party, the reserved rights of the States, and the paramount necessity of a strict construction of the Constitution; it had opposed the appropriation of the public money to works of internal improvement; it had resisted the establishment of a national bank, the emission of a paper currency, and the imposition of any tariff which should fail to afford equal protection to every section of the Union; it had vigorously prosecuted the war of 1812 with England and the war of 1847 with Mexico; in 1832 it had suppressed rebellion in South Carolina by the prompt assertion of the supremacy of the Federal Government; it had at all times in its history consistently asserted the exemption of slavery in the