

Aunt Fancy Speaks

In December 1860, President Buchanan concentrated on his annual message amid escalating tensions over South Carolina's potential secession. His assistant, William Henry Trescot, a member of South Carolina's aristocracy, played a crucial role in providing insights into the region's grievances. Buchanan believed that South Carolina would indeed secede, fearing violent conflict regarding federal forts in Charleston Harbor. However, Trescot expressed that the state's secession would be executed peacefully, akin to a business negotiation, promising that South Carolina would send representatives to sort out the separation with Congress.

When Buchanan completed his address, he shared it with Senator Jefferson Davis, a prominent Southern figure. Davis suggested revisions, and although he believed the final draft would align with South Carolina's constitutional right to secede, Buchanan continued to make changes. He later sent a copy of the address to Governor Gist of South Carolina through Trescot, who predicted immediate secession upon reading it.

Buchanan's speech was presented to Congress on December 4, garnishing significant attention. He reflected on the paradox of widespread prosperity contrasted with societal unrest, attributing the discontent squarely to the North's antislavery agitation, which eroded Southern security. He emphasized that the solution lay in allowing the Southern states to manage their domestic affairs without Northern interference, questioning the legitimacy of secession raised by fear alone, and positing that constitutional rights didn't justify disintegration of the Union. In his view, secession equated to revolution, justifiable only under egregious federal action.

The reception of his address was notably discontented, with Jefferson Davis vowing to sever ties with Buchanan over his denial of secession's right and Abraham Lincoln expressing shock at Buchanan's blame on the North for the crisis. Critics like William Seward and the *New-York Times* condemned the address, calling it incendiary and a dereliction of duty, only exacerbating the sectional conflict. Buchanan's reasoning established a complex legacy of inaction and misjudgment, encapsulating the precarious state of the Union on the brink of civil war.