

The Unfairness of It All

The Unfairness of It All captures the deepening frustrations and political turmoil experienced by President James Buchanan during the final stages of his presidency, as he navigated the ever-worsening divisions in the United States. Buchanan had entered office in 1857 with a sense of optimism and a desire to restore peace to a nation increasingly divided over the issue of slavery. However, by the end of his term, he found himself overwhelmed by the escalating conflict, particularly the political battle over whether Kansas would join the Union as a free or slave state. This issue, which he initially saw as relatively inconsequential and one best left to the Supreme Court to decide, came to dominate his presidency, exposing the deep sectional rifts within the nation. Despite his efforts to moderate the debate, Buchanan could not quell the rising tensions, and as his term drew to a close, he faced the bitter realization that the country's divisions might be irreversible.

The chapter delves further into Buchanan's controversial role in the Dred Scott decision, which had a profound impact on the nation's understanding of slavery and citizenship. The ruling, delivered by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney in 1857, declared that African Americans could not be citizens and that Congress had no authority to restrict slavery in the territories. While Buchanan publicly supported the decision, he had been privately involved in influencing the court's deliberations, a fact that became widely known after the decision was made public. Buchanan had been aware of the court's likely ruling before taking office, and despite claiming to view slavery as a "moral evil," he never took a stand against its presence in the South. Instead, he placed the blame for the national crisis squarely on the shoulders of abolitionists, whom he accused of inflaming tensions and leading the nation toward inevitable conflict. Buchanan's inconsistent stance on slavery, coupled with his failure to act decisively, contributed to his growing frustration and inability to address the mounting crisis facing the nation.

As Buchanan prepared for his final year in office, the looming threat of secession and civil war cast a shadow over his presidency. On December 3, 1860, he faced the daunting task of delivering his final annual message to Congress. The speech was seen as a pivotal moment for Buchanan to address the nation's worsening divisions and attempt to restore some sense of calm before Lincoln's inauguration. Yet, with the election of Abraham Lincoln and the increasing calls for secession from Southern states, Buchanan feared that his presidency would end in chaos rather than peace. As tensions flared and Southern states like South Carolina moved toward secession, Buchanan knew that his efforts to maintain the Union had failed. His final address to Congress would have to balance his desire to assure the public of a peaceful transition of power with the stark reality of the deepening divisions that threatened to tear the country apart. Buchanan's internal conflict over how to handle the crisis became increasingly evident as he prepared for the speech, knowing that any misstep could hasten the country's descent into war.

Buchanan's inability to quell the sectional strife also highlighted his growing realization that his administration had been ineffective in preventing the Union's disintegration. Despite his attempts to remain neutral and avoid taking strong positions on the issue of slavery, the political forces he had hoped to appease had moved far beyond compromise. His efforts to placate both the North and the South had ultimately alienated both sides, leaving him with little political support as the country stood on the brink of civil war. Buchanan's final year in office was marked by a sense of helplessness, as he was unable to prevent the disunion that was sweeping the nation. As he wrote his final message to Congress, Buchanan reflected on his failed attempts to secure peace, acknowledging that the nation's future now rested in the hands of his successor, Abraham Lincoln. The chapter highlights the profound sense of frustration that Buchanan felt during this time, as he realized that the fate of the Union was no longer in his control, and that the actions of the states would soon lead to a much larger conflict.

The growing crisis in 1860, coupled with Buchanan's indecisiveness and failure to act swiftly, served as a warning for the incoming Lincoln administration. Buchanan's final

months in office were fraught with political missteps and a sense of desperation as he struggled to prevent the country from spiraling into civil war. Despite his efforts to maintain peace, the deep divisions over slavery and states' rights could not be bridged, and the nation was left teetering on the edge of collapse. The chapter concludes by emphasizing Buchanan's bitter frustration, as he faced the prospect of a divided nation that would soon be engulfed in conflict. His presidency, marked by indecision and missed opportunities, became a stark reminder of the difficulties in balancing national unity during a period of intense ideological conflict.