

The Washington Post

PRESIDENTIAL

James Buchanan

The bachelor and the bloodshed

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: It's 1856 and Kansas is bleeding over the question of slavery. And the blood seeps outward in all directions -- toward Utah, where the Mormons will soon start fighting with U.S. troops. Toward Florida, where the remaining Native Americans are fighting to keep their lands in the third Seminole War. Toward New York, where the financial panic will close banks and businesses. And toward Washington D.C., where a senator from Massachusetts lies bloody on the Senate floor after a congressman from South Carolina beats him nearly to death with a cane.

This is the bleeding, broken America that is given to James Buchanan to fix as president. And when he looks to his side for help, he sees no one.

The love of his life has already died, though it turns out we're not sure if that love was Ms. Ann Coleman or Mr. William Rufus King. Either way, Buchanan is our first and only bachelor president. And by the time he leaves the White House, blood will be all over that bachelor's hands.

I'm Lillian Cunningham with The Washington Post, and this is the 15th episode of 'Presidential.'

PRESIDENTIAL THEME MUSIC

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Later in this episode, we're going to look at the economics of the North and South on the eve of Civil War. But first, we're going to look at another lack of union, and that's Buchanan's own personal life.

He's alone at the helm of this country that is tearing apart.

James Buchanan was born in Pennsylvania in 1791, just two years into George Washington's presidency. His parents were Scotch-Irish immigrants and technically he was born in a log cabin. But his father was a very successful merchant, successful enough that he could comfortably provide for 11 children. James was the second child, but he's the oldest son.

I spoke with historian Jean Baker about Buchanan. She's the same expert I turned to for our Millard Fillmore episode -- a president from much, much humbler beginnings than Buchanan.

JEAN BAKER: Buchanan was a favored son. The family was wealthy enough to send him to academies in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, and then he went to Dickinson College.

Remember how few American men and no women went to college in those days. This puts James Buchanan already on a very, very favorable platform for success. He then went and, as with Fillmore, he apprenticed in a law office and he became a very, very successful lawyer.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: After Buchanan had worked for a while in Lancaster as a lawyer, he ran for local political office. This is, like, the 12th time already that we've seen a young ambitious lawyer get into politics and ultimately become president. And it happens again with Buchanan. OK.

JEAN BAKER: James Buchanan had the best curriculum vita/dossier of any of our presidents. He served in the state legislature. He served in the U.S. Congress. He served in the U.S. Senate. He was Polk's secretary of War. He was Pierce's ambassador -- although they were called ministers then -- minister to the Court of St. James.

So, this is a guy who is manifesting all kinds of the successful attributes of leadership. He can communicate with his constituents. He gives what maybe to us are long and boring speeches, but according to the Pennsylvania newspapers, the audience loved them. And clearly because of his foreign policy experience, he was someone who could negotiate.

He spent a lot of time when he was at the Court of St. James negotiating with the British over issues in Central America. He also spent a lot of time trying to get Cuba. Buchanan saw Cuba as a future slave state for the South.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So I'll ask you my classic question, which is: If I were set up on a blind date with Buchanan, and I walked into the room, knew nothing about him -- what should I expect? What would he look like? What's his personality?

JEAN BAKER: Buchanan had this strange eye problem -- exodeviation -- in which one eye went one way and one went the other. If you got close to him, this is the first thing that you would have noticed about him -- that he never seemed to be looking at you with both of his eyes.

Beyond that, by the time he was running for president, he has this head of white hair. Buchanan was a big man, and he had a very loud voice. You would notice him because he could be very charming, and he loved the Washington social life. He would dance with all the women and he would tell jokes. So, he was a social being, in a sense that certainly Millard Fillmore never was.

He had one love affair and the woman died. And as our bachelor president, Buchanan has always been associated with homosexuality. The real love of his life, I think most historians agree, was Rufus King, whom he met in Washington.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: The woman was Ann Caroline Coleman, who came from a wealthy family in Pennsylvania. Buchanan was engaged to her, but she broke off their engagement for reasons that are still a bit mysterious. Whatever it was, she was so distraught about it that she died really soon after. Everyone at the time firmly concluded that she died of a broken heart. Really, I mean, that's what the records show -- and her family blamed Buchanan for her death and wouldn't let him attend the funeral.

There's this one letter that Buchanan appears to have sent to her father, where he writes, and I'm reading from it now: 'My dear sir, You have lost a child -- a dear, dear child. I have lost the only earthly object of my affections, without whom life now presents to me a dreary blank. My prospects are all cut off and I feel that my happiness will be buried with her in the grave. It is now no time for explanation. But the time will come when you will discover that she, as well as I, have been much abused.'

Then he goes on a bit about begging to attend her funeral, and then writes:

'I would like to convince the world, and I hope to convince you, that she was infinitely dearer to me than life. I may sustain the shock of her death, but I feel that happiness has fled from me forever.'

Buchanan is in his late 20s at this time, and he decides that, after this, he is not going to pursue marriage again. While he's serving in Congress in Washington, though, he becomes very close friends with a number of Southern politicians. And most importantly of the bunch, there's a senator from Alabama named William Rufus King, who also happens to be a bachelor.

Many historians now think that in the end it was King who ultimately became the real love of Buchanan's life, and that Buchanan was likely gay. But, of course, Buchanan and his contemporaries wouldn't have exactly thought about it that way.

JEAN BAKER: The word homosexuality doesn't exist until it emerges in Germany in 1868. And here we're talking about the 1820s, '30s and '40s. There was no identification. Today, people identify as gay or not. In this period, there were certainly men who were gay. Walt Whitman is perhaps the outstanding example. But Buchanan did not identify as a homosexual. So, when we go back and think about sexuality, especially homosexuality, we need to think about it differently. It's not an identity.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, if Buchanan didn't self-identify that way, I've wondered why it is that so many historians think he was gay. It's particularly hard to know the nature of his relationship with King since Buchanan burned almost every single one of his letters and documents before his death.

To get some sense, though, of why this has become the pretty common narrative about Buchanan, I spoke with Jim Loewen, who's a sociologist and historian. He wrote a book called "Lies My Teacher Told Me." I asked Jim what we do and don't actually know about Buchanan's personal life, and whether any of that is actually even relevant to a study of his presidency.

So, you know, we know James Buchanan never married. But what are the historical documents that suggest he was gay or that have raised that question for historians?

JIM LOEWEN: Well, according to his fiance's best girlfriend, she broke off the engagement because he could not seem to bring himself to show proper affection. So, that whole escapade might be considered one piece of evidence.

But the best evidence is that he lived for many, many years with William Rufus King, but then King went off to France. He was appointed our ambassador to France in 1844. So Buchanan actually

wrote to a woman named Mrs. Roosevelt, and he wrote the following: 'I am now solitary and alone, having no companion in the house with me. I have gone a'wooing to several gentlemen but have not succeeded with any one of them.'

Well, I think that's pretty good evidence. I mean, what do we want in the 19th century in terms of written documentation of homosexuality? I know of no gay historian who thinks he was not gay.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: And I'm curious -- why do you think that this is an interesting question to explore?

JIM LOEWEN: Well, I think the first reason it's an interesting question to explore is because we have a phenomenon of writing gays out of our history and assuming that most people aren't gay and that gays never did much -- that it's just a little bitty minority. Well, we've clearly had a gay president.

There's one other connection that's very important, and that is this connection between Buchanan's gay partner and his politics. [Buchanan] comes from Southern Pennsylvania. All the people in this neighborhood -- well, most of them -- are Quakers and Mennonites. The Mennonites, then followed by the Quakers, are the first two groups to come out against slavery in Western culture. And yet, Buchanan is a member of the far-out, proslavery wing of the Democratic Party. So, the connection between his sexual orientation and his far-out, pro-slavery political position -- that would certainly be important to understand Buchanan as president.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Is there evidence that he was scrutinized for his sexuality, or even just the fact that he was a president who was not and had not been married?

JIM LOEWEN: Well, people refer to him as Aunt Nancy -- and that's kind of a term that people used for effeminate gay people. So, people knew. Andrew Jackson called him Miss Nancy. People called King 'Buchanan's better half.' So, I think it was pretty well known that he was gay.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Obviously he gets elected to be president being a bachelor. But, do you have a sense at the time that that was politically a strike against him in any way? I mean, we haven't had another president who hasn't been married.

JIM LOEWEN: Yeah, I don't think it was a factor. After all, he won the election. You know, I don't think that America has always gotten more and more and more tolerant with regard to sexual orientation or with regard to race relations or with regard to anything else. We become more tolerant and then something else happens and we become less tolerant.

The most racist period, in terms of our thinking, was that period 1890 to 1940. African-Americans were thrown out of jobs that they had held before. Well, I think similarly, maybe we were more tolerant in the 1850s of gay folks than we became by, say, 1920.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: One of the things that has struck me so far in doing this podcast is that, in some ways, it seems like we had a much broader range of presidents back then in the early days of America because the office was just so much less public than it is today.

We had short presidents like Madison. We had widowed presidents. We had presidents who hated public speaking. And now, in 1856, we have a country that elected its first, and so far, its only

bachelor president.

James Buchanan had actually run for president a couple of times before. In fact, he was one of the leading candidates for the Democratic nomination the last time around, in 1852. But the party ended up nominating Franklin Pierce instead. The person chosen to be Pierce's vice president in '52 was none other than William Rufus King. And if you listened closely to last week's episode, you might remember that King died very, very shortly into his term.

King got really sick with tuberculosis before the inauguration and he sailed to Cuba to recuperate. He was so sick, though, that Congress ends up making an exception and they allow him to take the vice presidential oath of office from Cuba. He tried to return back to the U.S. shortly after and he made it all the way to his home in Alabama, but then died the day after returning.

One interesting little fact about King is that he founded and named the city of Selma, Alabama, where so many pivotal Civil Rights protests are going to take place about 100 years later.

King was never replaced as vice president, and as Pierce's time in the White House is coming to an end, the Democratic Party decides to finally throw its full support behind Buchanan -- who is now 65-years old and has been in public service for about 40 of those years. Buchanan ends up running against Millard Fillmore, who's up for president again as part of the short-lived American Party, and also against John C. Fremont of the new antislavery Republican Party.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: In the course of the campaign, the Republicans make some personal jabs against Buchanan, mocking his older age and his bachelorhood. And then there's this one particularly sad and cruel jab where they poke fun at Buchanan for always tilting his head when he talks. He did actually tilt his head, and that was probably because of the eye problems that he had. But his opponents at the time say it's because he once tried to hang himself -- like he needs that on top of everything else. So sad.

Buchanan wins the election anyway, but not with too much of a popular mandate. I talked to Jean Baker about how all of these aspects of his personal life that we've been hearing about so far go on to influence his presidency.

JEAN BAKER: In terms of Buchanan's presidency, the fact that he was a bachelor was very important -- because all through his life, he associated himself with groups more and more often of Southerners. And this association reflects and then creates his support for the South, which became very obvious.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So what exactly is the relationship there? Why is the fact that he was a bachelor -- why is that connected to his views?

JEAN BAKER: When we talk about the Buchanan presidency, we see he really came to dislike Northern abolitionists. He thought they were the cause of all of this rampant confusion and chaos in Kansas. He loved Southerners. He thought that they were more graceful, more charming. He got along with them better. And when it came time to pick his cabinet, this Southernness that he has -- this desire to be with Southerners -- really intrudes on his policy-making. He appoints his cabinet of six, and four of them are slave-holding Southerners.

His whole life revolved around this appreciation for the South. He never went North. So, really the

astonishing thing about Buchanan is: He's been around the world, he's been minister to Russia. But he never goes to Boston. He doesn't like the North. He likes Southerners. And that fits into -- I think -- his admiration of King, who's from Alabama. But unfortunately, it's going to affect his policymaking when he becomes president in a very big and, I think, destructive way for the Union.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: OK, so here are some of the key things he does as president. First of all, right out of the gate, he encourages a Northerner on the Supreme Court to side with the South in the Dred Scott case, which basically nationalizes slavery. And the decision for this case comes out just days after he is inaugurated.

Then the other enormously huge thing is that the fate of Kansas as a slave state or a free state has reached a complete boiling point. And he ultimately decides to support a Kansas Constitution that was written by Southern pro-slavery settlers.

JEAN BAKER: Buchanan is so outrageously pro-Southern that it is shocking to most Northerners. In Kansas, there were really essentially two governments -- one was free soil and the other was pro-slave. And in all of his actions, Buchanan supported the Southern side. This is something that set more and more Northerners against him.

He, as a leader, was never able to understand what was going on in the country. And what was going on in the country was that there were more and more and more Northerners, and more and more of these Northerners see slavery as a detriment to the future of the great republic. And Buchanan, with his constant harping on how Northerners were extremists and they were supporting Southern black rapists (he uses the word 'rapist' in one of his speeches to Congress) -- as Buchanan moves farther and farther away from what is happening, really, in the United States, the obviousness of what's going to happen is insurmountable.

I mean, one of the problems with Buchanan is that -- given this great dossier of successes, he's arrogant that he can solve this problem that no one else can. And that's the way he acts in Kansas.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Do you get the sense that he really did want to solve the problem and just went about it all the wrong way? Or what do you think was motivating him and driving him?

JEAN BAKER: You know, I think he really thought he could solve it. And it's the irony of having this superb political CV. I mean, to have been everything that you could possibly be -- he was even offered a seat on the Supreme Court -- and then come to the presidency, I could see that someone with his temperament would become dogmatic and would think that he could save the Union.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: He's trying to save the Union by essentially encouraging the country to preserve things as they've always been: a South that does things one way, and a North that does it another way. But what Buchanan doesn't seem to realize is that that isn't actually an option anymore.

JEAN BAKER: He was shocked -- shocked -- when Abraham Lincoln won the electoral vote. He didn't see what was happening. And I think that that's something that presidential (*good* presidential) leadership absolutely requires: You have to be able to understand the future. And Buchanan was, to some extent, mired in the past -- mired in this romantic Southern vision of slaveholders who study the Constitution and the Classics, while the slaves are out in the field.

Woodrow Wilson once said that presidential leadership requires that you understand and interpret the nation. Buchanan never interpreted the nation.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Buchanan is alone at the helm of the country on the eve of Civil War, and the America he's presiding over looks less and less united too. There are two different moralities, two different economies and a divide over what would be better -- to return to the America of the past or speed ahead to the America of the future.

A big question that's been on my mind for a while now has been: What were the economics of slavery? What did America's economy -- North and South -- look like? So for this I turn to my colleague, economics reporter Jim Tankersley, who's in the studio with me right now.

JIM TANKERSLEY: Hey, thanks for having me. I'm so excited to talk economics.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Great, well I mean I quite literally turned to you because you sit basically right next to me in the newsroom, and you graciously offered to research pre-Civil War economics for this episode.

So let's just start with: What's the most interesting thing that you found out?

JIM TANKERSLEY: It was fascinating. It's a fascinating period in history. And, yet, in some ways, you're going to hear some things that sound pretty familiar. It's sort of a two-Americas kind of situation in the economy back then.

The South was very much sort of the old economy of America -- the kind of economy that it was founded on, still very agricultural. Like 70 percent of people in the South -- 80 percent in some places -- worked on farms still. And most everybody lived in small towns in the South. New Orleans was basically the only really big city that they had. They transported their goods on the waterways, and they had a lot of slaves who worked their big plantations, some with more than 1,000 slaves. There were also some smaller family farms. And they made their money exporting cotton, among other things.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: To Europe --

JIM TANKERSLEY: Yes, exporting cotton to Europe. To England, in particular. And they bought a lot of stuff in return from England.

Now, the North -- the North was a changing economy. It was industrializing. Europe had started to industrialize like a decade before, and the North was way ahead of the South in doing that. It had a lot more railroads, a lot more factories. The workers in the North were all free -- they weren't slaves -- but they did have a lot of cheap immigrant labor. Again, some things that are starting to sound a little bit like today. And they had a lot more of a divide with a professional class: more doctors, more educators, more educated people.

They didn't make their money so much on exports. In fact, they were in favor of taxing imports to try to make it so that the South and other parts of America would have to buy more of their goods and not Europe's. And so this is one of the economic fault lines that begins to unfold.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, you know, obviously one of these big questions that's unfolding during

Buchanan's administration is this question of slavery in the territories.

JIM TANKERSLEY: Yeah, so first off, we think a lot about labor and capital today. Labor being people who work. Capital being things that you own -- equipment, or software, or whatever. Well back then, the North had a lot more capital than the South in terms of factories, like we've talked about, or infrastructure.

But the South had capital too -- if you consider people to be property, as they did. The Southern slaveholders considered their slaves to be capital, and they wanted their capital to be mobile. If they wanted to move west and settle a new state, they wanted to be able to take their slaves with them, otherwise they couldn't be taking their wealth, quite literally, with them.

They also would have more of a market in selling to those states if they were slave-holding. And maybe most importantly, they would have more of a political constituency for the types of economic policies that would be pro-Southern.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So do you have a sense in this time, right before the Civil War, if you're looking at the U.S. economy -- how much of it is really being powered by slavery and agriculture versus what percentage of it has become dominated by Northern industry?

JIM TANKERSLEY: There's a couple of ways to think about that. The first is that, in the South, it's almost entirely agricultural; and for that America -- of our two Americas back then -- slavery is crucial to their business model. It's much easier to produce cotton that you sell to the rest of the world if the cotton is cheaper because you're basically paying nothing for the people who pick it.

On the other hand, in the North, what you had was a business model that didn't need slavery because they already had this cheap labor coming in -- immigrants who didn't ever settle in the South hardly at all. They settled in the North.

And then finally, and I think this is maybe the most interesting divide here, the Northern economy is booming whereas the Southern economy is starting to stagnate. In some places, over the course of the first half of the 1800s, they go through a lot of really devastating recessions. And those really hurt people in the South -- workers in the South, landowners in the South.

So, there's this sense that the Northern economy is moving ahead, the Southern economy is stalled, and that is a big fault line and point of tension.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, actually, one thing I wanted to ask you about is: In 1857, the first year that Buchanan's in office, there's an economic recession that's brought on by the failure of the Ohio Life Insurance Company. Thousands of businesses end up going bankrupt, and it takes a couple of years, really, for the country to recover.

This has happened a couple times now in the 1800s. What's going on at this time that the economy is so volatile and that we're seeing these pretty rough recessions hit?

JIM TANKERSLEY: There's a theory of economics that has a great explanation for this. And that's the idea that there wasn't what we think of, in any way, as central banking back then. There was no Federal Reserve or anyone else around to help stabilize an economy if it went into recession. And the federal government is not really big enough that it can spend its way out of a demand

shortfall. So, what that means is that there is nobody around to kickstart the economic engine back to life if it starts to sputter out.

In the 20th century what the Fed has done at times, including in the aftermath of this most recent recession, is to step in and say: We will take steps to try to get people spending money again, so that the recession doesn't last as long and isn't as painful. But you don't really have anyone doing that in America in the 1800s.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: By the time Buchanan leaves office, the population in the U.S. is up to, I think, just over 30 million. And in this decade between 1850 and 1860, it's grown about 25 percent. As you mentioned, most of that population growth is because of an influx of immigrants - mostly German and Irish.

JIM TANKERSLEY: So, this is interesting. There are so many historical echoes in what's happening here. One of them is: We're having a big immigration debate right now, and people are debating whether or not immigrants are good for the economy or bad. One of the lessons we might take from this era in American history is the growth of the Northern economy was powered by immigrant labor, in part, in the factories. There's a real reason to look at that evidence and say immigration is not historically incompatible with economic growth. And, in fact, just the basic math of it makes sense. There are more people to do more things, to produce more things, so the economy can grow faster.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Could you give a couple examples of, when you talk about industry in the North at that time, what sort of industry we're talking about?

JIM TANKERSLEY: So there's textiles; there's furniture manufacturing; very importantly for the war, there's a lot of ship-building happening in the North; and obviously a lot of munitions happening as well. And then, all of the infrastructure needed for the railroads is being manufactured in the North. So the tools of economic expansion are being built in one part of the country.

And in the South, they're churning out the raw materials for clothes and for things that are very valued by people around the world. But they -- for a lot of political reasons -- aren't investing in that sort of 'next economy', I guess you would call it. And the idea that we should have railroads or even roads connecting the states that are at all navigable? They're happy to just go with this boat-based transportation to get their cotton to market in the way that they always have.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: What ends up eventually helping the North win the war is the fact that they do have better infrastructure, and they do have a lot of the material that ultimately will help them better supply armies better transport goods.

JIM TANKERSLEY: Yeah, they have a lot of the things that economists would say are really important to economic growth that also turned out to be very important for winning wars at this period in history.

And even though there are more Southerners per capita signing up for their military, there are just more men in the North who can fight. They have more equipment. They have more wealth. The South started at a huge disadvantage that way. And, meanwhile, the North blockades the South from exporting most of the cotton. And so, it ends up being cut off from its source of money. So, economics end up also playing a big role in who wins the war.

One other thing that I would mention is: There is a bit of controversy in how we talk about economics with the war because, for a long time, talking about the economics of the North and the South was a way to avoid talking about slavery as a reason why Southerners seceded from the Union. It was a kind of moral sanitizer, almost. Like: 'Oh well, it was for economic reasons. We all agree slavery was bad, but economically they were forced to keep using it because otherwise their economy would've collapsed.'

I don't think that that's true. I think that the moral components of the war are high, and the moral components of slavery are high. And actually, it comes back to that economic term that we discussed in the beginning. It's very different when you consider people to be people, as opposed to property that you can own and trade. And that moral judgment ends up being an economic judgment, too. And if your business model, so to speak, as a region, depends upon a moral judgment that history now finds repugnant, that is a very different thing than just saying, 'There was a dispute about tariffs, and they went to war over them.'

I think it's important that when we talk about economics, we don't leave morality out of it entirely -- because morality matters, even in markets.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: By the end of Buchanan's one term in office, the Democratic Party itself has split over these issues -- so much so, actually, that there end up being two Democratic nominees for president after Buchanan: John C. Breckinridge, who was Buchanan's vice president, and then Stephen Douglas. This splintering in the Democratic Party is basically what allows the much more recently formed Republican Party to mobilize and to win the election with its candidate, Abraham Lincoln.

Not long after Lincoln wins, South Carolina decides to secede from the Union. This is while Buchanan is still serving his last few months in office. And by the time Buchanan actually leaves the White House, six more states have also seceded.

Buchanan wants the Union to hold together -- he's not in favor of the South seceding -- but he seems unable to do anything more than just blame the North for meddling in the South's business and for prompting this massive rift.

On the day that Buchanan officially leaves the presidency and hands it over to Lincoln, Buchanan turned to Lincoln and said, 'If you are as happy, my dear sir, on entering this house as I am in leaving it and returning home, you are the happiest man in the country.'