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Title: Letter from James Buchanan to W. C. N. Swift

Date: August 4, 1859

Location: I-Friends-2001-3

Contact:

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Private

Washington, 4 August 1859.

My dear Sir,

I have received your favor of the 26th ultimo and regret to learn that any difficulty exists in harmonising the Democracy of Massachusetts. I feel a deep interest in the selection of a sound national man as a Candidate for the next Presidency, without feeling a decided preference for any individual and am, therefore, anxious that the Delegation from Massachusetts should be composed of sound national men who will act in unison in accomplishing this great and patriotic object. It would neither be prudent nor proper for me to interfere in what belongs exclusively to yourselves; but if the Massachusetts

Convention should select either W.
Whitney or yourself or both as delegates
to the Charleston Convention I shall
be perfectly satisfied with their choice.
A conciliatory spirit ought to prevail
among all to produce union and
harmony; and I confess that the
programme which you presented to me
in conversation for this purpose
appeared to be reasonable and wise
and well calculated to accomplish
the object.

from your friend
Very respectfully
James Buchanan

W.C. A. Swift Esquire

PROFILES

IN HISTORY

BUCHANAN, JAMES. 1791-1868. 15th President of the U.S. (1857-1861). Previous to his Presidency, served as a member of the Pennsylvania Legislature (1814-16) and the U.S. House of Representatives (1821-31). Also served as Minister to Russia (1832-24), U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania (1834-45), Secretary of State (1845-49) under James K. Polk, and Minister to Great Britain (1853-56). Defeated for the Presidency in 1844, 1848, and 1852. Helped draft the Ostend Manifesto, proposing the acquisition of Cuba from Spain (October, 1854). During his administration, South Carolina and six other Southern states seceded from the Union (December, 1860 - February, 1861).

**As the showdown in Charleston at the Democratic Convention looms,
James Buchanan voices his Presidential opinion for the selection of a
"Sound national man" who will preserve "union and harmony" to represent
the Massachusetts delegation**

*"I feel a deep interest in the Selection of a Sound national man as a Candidate for
the next Presidency... A conciliatory Spirit ought to prevail among all to produce
union and harmony"*

BUCHANAN, JAMES. Exceptional Letter Signed as President, Two pages, Quarto, dated August 4, 1859 from Washington. Marked "Private" at the head, it is written to a Mr. W.C.N. Swift, Esq. Buchanan writes (in full):

"My dear Sir:

I have received your favor of the 26th ultimo and regret to learn that any difficulty exists in harmonizing the Democracy of Massachusetts. I feel a deep interest in the Selection of a Sound national man as a Candidate for the next Presidency, without feeling a decided preference for any individual and am, therefore, anxious that the Delegation from Massachusetts should be composed of sound national men who will act in unison in accomplishing this great and patriotic object. It would neither be prudent nor proper for me to interfere in what belongs exclusively to yourselves; but if the Massachusetts Convention should select either Mr. Whitney or yourself or both as delegates to the Charleston Convention I shall be perfectly satisfied with their choice. A conciliatory Spirit ought to prevail among all to produce union and harmony; and I confess that the programme which you presented to me in conversation for this purpose appeared to be reasonable and wise and well calculated to accomplish the object.

*from your friend
very respectfully*

James Buchanan"

Elbert Smith writes in The Presidency of James Buchanan (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1975),

"The presidential convention system has usually served American at least tolerably well, but at Charleston, South Carolina, in 1860, all of its potential frailties were united in one hideous example.

PROFILES

IN HISTORY

Indeed, the very selection by the Democrats of Charleston as a reward to the South for good behavior in 1856 ranks with the same party's designation of Chicago in 1968 as the two most inane such decisions in American political history. A possible Southern secession from the party was universally recognized as the greatest single threat, but the convention was nonetheless held in the one city most likely to produce this result."

The convention was doomed from the start. Fiery speeches and threats from every faction of the Party prevented the adoption of a cohesive platform. Candidate Stephen Douglas, a "concession" pick for strong Southern sympathizers, was forced to accept a number of mildly-worded planks that prevented him from securing the "secessionist" votes. The fire-eaters from Georgia and South Carolina stormed out of the Convention in protest, and the Convention was adjourned on April 30, 1860 – just one tumultuous week after the call to order – without selecting a candidate.

The delegates agreed to meet in Baltimore at a later date, in hopes that passions would subside and a compromise could be reached. In the end, Douglas won the candidacy over incumbent Buchanan. The only question remaining was how many Northern Democrats would abandon their ticket in favor of Lincoln, and what the Southern reaction would be upon the election of an Abolitionist Republican.

Perhaps the most insightful assessment of the political events of the 1860 Democratic convention came from future Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens, who remarked:

"The seceders intended from the beginning 'to rule or ruin'... Envy, hate, jealousy, spite – these make war in Heaven, which makes devils of angels and the same passions will make devils of men. The Secession movement was instigated by nothing but bad passions. Patriotism, in my opinion, has no more to do with it than love of God had with the other revolt."

An historic letter, as Buchanan makes an ill-fated attempt to unite his Democratic party in the face of imminent Southern secession. In very fine condition. (#22986)