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Michael F. Holt, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (Editor), Sean Wilentz (Editor)

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The genial but troubled New Englander whose single-minded partisan loyalties inflamed the nation's simmering battle over slavery

Charming and handsome, Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire was drafted to break the deadlock of the 1852 Democratic convention. Though he seized the White House in a landslide against the imploding Whig Party, he proved a dismal failure in office.

Michael F. Holt, a leading historian of nineteenth-century partisan politics, argues that in the wake of the Whig collapse, Pierce was consumed by an obsessive drive to unify his splintering party rather than the roiling country. He soon began to overreach. Word leaked that Pierce wanted Spain to sell the slave-owning island of Cuba to the United States, rousing sectional divisions. Then he supported repeal of the Missouri Compromise, which limited the expansion of slavery in the west. Violence broke out, and "Bleeding Kansas" spurred the formation of the Republican Party. By the end of his term, Pierce's beloved party had ruptured, and he lost the nomination to James Buchanan.

In this incisive account, Holt shows how a flawed leader, so dedicated to his party and ill-suited for the presidency, hastened the approach of the Civil War.

Franklin Pierce Details

Date : Published March 30th 2010 by Times Books (first published 2010)

ISBN : 9780805087192

Author : Michael F. Holt , Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (Editor) , Sean Wilentz (Editor)

Format : Hardcover 176 pages

Genre : Politics, Presidents, History, Biography, Nonfiction, North American Hi..., American History

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Download and Read Free Online Franklin Pierce Michael F. Holt , Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (Editor) , Sean Wilentz (Editor)

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Steve says

<http://bestpresidentialbios.com/2014/...>

“Franklin Pierce” by Michael Holt was published in 2010 and is one of the newest members of The American Presidents Series. Holt is a professor of American History at the University of Virginia and the author of a half-dozen books. Among these are “By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876” and “The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party.”

The American Presidents Series has been criticized for advancing the political views of its long-time editor, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., at the expense of a consistently objective view of history. Holt’s biography of Franklin Pierce, however, cannot be tarnished with that stain. And rather than embracing history’s dismal view of Pierce with no further effort to diagnose his failure, Holt’s biography is more intellectually substantive than its size would suggest.

Consistent with other books in the series, this biography is concise and punchy, containing just 133 pages of text. Despite this brevity, it captures the essence of Pierce’s genial personality and well-describes his almost effortless political rise from state legislator to president of the United States.

Holt’s biography provides excellent, though summary, background describing the political chessboard which confronted Pierce as he entered office. The reader is also granted a clear view of Pierce’s conduct as president as well as the rationale behind his controversial actions. The result is a surprisingly comprehensive account of Pierce’s presidency and the implications of his choices.

Holt is at his best when diagnosing the miserable failure of Pierce’s presidency while simultaneously demonstrating the man’s honesty and decency. Holt argues that Pierce’s decision to chart a “middle course” on the subject of slavery and his effort to preserve the unity of the Democratic party led to his disastrous policy decisions (notably the Kansas-Nebraska Act). Instead of pacifying a broad swath of the country he dangerously inflamed sectional tensions and may have set the country on a more direct path to Civil War.

One of the strengths of the book is also one of its weaknesses. Because it is so concise, the author is unable to fully explore all of the themes useful in fully understanding the political environment in the 1850s. Occasionally the author does choose to dive deeply into a topic – such as the evolution of the various political factions and the eventual destruction of the Whig Party. In these instances the pace slows considerably, and the biography begins to feel weighty and complex.

Overall, however, Holt has successfully shouldered the burden of describing a likable but unexceptional politician and analyzing his historically ineffective presidency in a balanced and thoughtful way. While not the deepest or most scholarly of presidential portraits, Holt’s biography of Franklin Pierce is exactly the type of book many will appreciate for this president: it is engaging, descriptive and delightfully efficient.

Overall rating: 4 stars

Gary Schantz says

After reading about this president on Wikipedia, I became intrigued about his biography. This book was very informative and detailed about the Pierce's life. This was man who experienced many heartbreaks such as the death of all his children (while they were young and all of these deaths took place before he became president). The most recent death was of the only child who lived to be 12 and was killed a few weeks before Pierce was inaugurated. From the get-go his presidency was doomed because of the slavery issue and as a result he would serve only one-term. He was never able to solve the slavery dilemma without alienating his own party as well the country itself. Sadly, he has been rated as one of the worse president in history simply because he was seen as too accomodating to both sides of the issue because he didnt want to see a civil war break out by outright outlawing slavery. With every new territory that would join the country during his short time in office, disputes broke out over whether they would be slave or free states. In the end, his own party would discard him in favor of James Buchanan (who would suffer the same fate as Pierce four years later). The book did a great job of explaining his life, his presidency, and they way he conducted himself as a man. It was a short but good read.

Alissa says

Concise overview of this one term president as we get closer to the civil war. Tried to cater to southerners. Wanted to keep the party together. Was blamed for "bleeding Kansas"

Jeremy Maddux says

I read this hoping to dispel the arguments of his detractors. When even the author was trying very hard to defend him and failed, I arrived at the same conclusion as them. He was pretty damn horrible any way you cut it. His only saving grace was that he cut a pretty tragic figure in losing his wife and all of their children young, being alone at the end of his life with only author Nathaniel Hawthorne as a friend and dying of aggressive alcoholism.

Also, there's a bit of rambling in the middle that I felt teetered on the verge of becoming 'infodump.' The author failed to keep the narrative anchored to the book's namesake at times.

Mike Fournier says

Being blindingly handsome didn't help this poor sap from steering us into civil war. Interesting character, though. Would certainly like to go more in depth on his drunken adventures.

Daniel says

This book is held back by the authors antiseptic presentation of facts. He refuses to analyze the events, interpret motives, or draw conclusions from any of the events of the period or writings of Pierce. On one

hand, this is a well researched retelling of events that allows the reader to form their own judgements. However, it neglects the impact of events that HAD to have influenced Pierce. Take for instance that Pierce's young son died in front of him in a train accident months before the inauguration. Surely the despair and possibly PTSD from such an event affected his judgement during his time in office? Yet, life-altering moments like these are barely touched on with no reflection. The book is adequate but will likely leave readers without a grasp of the spirit of the time or the man it is based on.

Arminius says

Known as one of the handsomest presidents Franklin Pierce also became known as one of America's worst presidents. He was rugged and athletically built. He preferred hiking and hunting to studying. He was born in New Hampshire. He attended Bowdoin College in Maine and studied law under Levi Woodbury. Woodbury was the Treasury Secretary under President Andrew Jackson. Pierce became an admirer of President Jackson and his politics ran in sync with Jackson. He became a successful lawyer then transferred to politics which he loved. He was elected to four consecutive terms in New Hampshire's House of Representatives. He was so well liked at the State House that first they elected him Speaker and later elected him to the Senate.

When the Mexican American war broke out he enlisted and had a successful tour of duty under Winfield Scott. In 1852 a deadlock at the Democratic National Convention led to his nomination as the democratic candidate. He followed his nomination with a close victory over his former supervisor and Whig Party Candidate, Winfield Scott, to become America's 14th President.

His personal life was very tragic. His devoted wife was often morose. She also despised politics. Two of their sons died before their fifth birthday. His last son was killed in a train wreck.

He governed under a strict Jacksonian philosophy. He was a northerner who supported the fugitive slave law while many northern democrats opposed it. His huge mistake was signing the Kansas Nebraska Act. The Act repealed the Compromise of 1850 and allowed States to determine for themselves whether or not to allow slavery in their respective states. This was very unpopular in the North. It also produced much violence in the new territory. It is often cited as the forbearer to the Civil War.

His policies deeply divided his party. So when his term ended he was not nominated for a second term.

While President he invested wisely in Rail Roads and Banks which left him a wealthy man in retirement. He traveled to Europe with his wife and bought a large farm in New Hampshire to retire to.

Zach Koenig says

After the abrupt death of President Zachary Taylor and the resulting middling presidency of Millard Fillmore, President Franklin Pierce at least brought some stability back to the White House. Unfortunately, the country was anything but stable at that point in time, and a few of Pierce's decisions only inflamed matters.

In this book, author Holt focuses on two primary areas of Pierce's life: Besides the requisite backstory, Holt keys in on Pierce's obsession with preserving the strength of the Democratic Party, as well as his controversial decisions regarding the Kansas/Nebraska act that blew up in his face and really became the first

physical act to which Civil War rumblings could be traced.

What I liked about this book is that it doesn't try to defend Pierce. Instead, author Holt fully accepts the notion that Pierce was not one of our country's greatest leaders, and tries to give us readers a better idea of why certain events played out as they did.

About the only criticism I have is that, at times, the book goes way too deep into the inner workings of the Democratic Party, producing a listing of names and committees that more casual readers will just kind of gloss over. I understand Holt's desire to be thorough, but I still think it was a bit overkill.

Despite that one small negative, this is a very well-written, engaging edition to this series. Nothing to shy away from, that is for sure.

Doreen Petersen says

Franklin Pierce could undoubtedly be considered as one of the worst US presidents. His personal life was in shambles and his constant drinking eventually led to his death.

Kierstin says

OMG people, Franklin Pierce is a train wreck to locate, digest, and analyze. Our 14th President and a Democrat, he was elected in 1852 and served one term. He was a lawyer and local politician in his home state of New Hampshire, and was considered a good looking and charming guy who made friends easily.

He was elected in a landslide following the dismal service of VP-turned-POTUS Millard Fillmore, and largely considered a consensus candidate in the era of sectional rigidity (which ultimately also became his greatest flaw in the eyes of voters). A northerner with southern sympathies, Pierce campaigned on a platform of state's rights, constitutionalism, and bridge building (relational, not actual).

In Pierce's (and the author's) defense, US politics in the 1850s was a mess of factions within party umbrellas. You've got northern abolitionists, northern sympathizers, northern republicans, southern pro-compromisers, southern anti-pro-compromisers (totally what they were called), southern unionists, and the western front to name just a few. Then in 1854, the Know-Nothing party took advantage of the confusion and swept the midterm elections. (They earned their name by claiming to know absolutely nothing about the party line to avoid exposure and recrimination of their anti-immigrant/catholic sentiments.)

Pierce was a decent politician and decided to build his cabinet in an attempt to represent the feuding ideas within the Democratic party, as opposed to simply filling it with supporters from his own camp (northern sympathizers - which were actually men from the north with positive feelings for the southern predicament). Ultimately, this tactic was a mistake, fueling resentment that led to his failed renomination, but Pierce's cabinet is historically considered the most "honest" due to the complete lack of patronage and cooperation. His cabinet, against the odds, is also the only one ever to remain intact for an entire administration.

In that environment, Pierce's Administration embarked on a few adventures of impact:

1) He very much wanted to acquire Cuba, which caused significant concern/elation about its inevitable admission as a slave state. The purchase from Spain was not accomplished, and instead the feelers caused unease in European allies who were abiding by Manifest Destiny expansion prohibitions.

2) Secretary of War Jefferson Davis convinced Pierce to coordinate the purchase from Mexico the land in what is now southern Arizona and New Mexico for a railway line (it was the only passable land for the technology of that time). The only point of interest here is that with this purchase the continental US became what we know it as today.

3) The Kansas/Nebraska Act of 1854. Whoa Doggies. This piece of legislation was a nice bit of kindling placed just a couple of years before the 1861 start of the Civil War. Essentially, for railroad expansion to occur, the western territory needed to be speculated and organized into a state-in-waiting. For the slave/non-slave state count to remain balanced, Nebraska would enter free and Kansas would enter slave. The expansion of slavery was considered anathema to abolitionist northerners, and the idea of popular sovereignty was agreed to, meaning citizens of the states would vote to decide the outcome for themselves. The "solution" caused a run of Missouri slave holders to cross the border on vote day, resulting in an official "slave government" that enacted unusually cruel and harsh pro-slavery laws in the territory. A shadow "free government" was stood up in protest, which Pierce did not recognize, leading to regular violence on the prairie.

At this point in history, Democrats were so divided they could barely scrape a win in the 1856 election, and only by dumping Franklin Pierce from the ticket. The pro-southern, pro-compromise-at-any-cost stance of the Democratic party helped birth the pro-North, abolitionist-sympathizing Republicans who won their first election just four years later.

(For anyone who cares about his personal life like I do, Pierce was married to a religious conservative and had three sons. One son died in infancy, another at 4 years old from illness, and the last one was decapitated in front of his parents in a train accident on the way to Pierce's inauguration. His best friend was author Nathaniel Hawthorne, with whom Pierce would travel frequently. After the death of his wife, and Hawthorne a few years later, Pierce returned to the heavy drinking his wife prohibited and died of cirrhosis in a cabin on the New England shore.)

This bit of American history is mired in the details of the day and offers little besides a further explanation of why we went to civil war. The author premised his book on a silly and unnecessary thesis but I am grateful to him for providing me with the one and only Franklin Pierce biography in easy circulation.

karen says

HAPPY PRESIDENT'S DAY!!

it's franklin pierce, y'all!!!

new hampshire's favorite son!

congress' hardest drinker!

a wonderful paradox of a man - he wasn't pro-slavery, he just hated abolitionists. how does that even work?? i'll tell you how: cuz frank loved rules. he fucking loved that constitution more than he loved his depressed, socially awkward, rich wife, and those filthy abolitionists were trying to destroy it, and therefore america.watch out abolitionists!

it's true, he is considered to be one of the worst. presidents. ever. but it's not his fault he was woefully unqualified. he was pretty, and pretty people are used to everybody paying attention to them and supporting everything they do whether it should be supported or not. it doesn't mean they are competent to serve. franklin was nominated, he batted his big eyes and said "sure, i'll do it. we going to the bar afterwards?? will there be any abolitionists there?? there had fucking well better not be"

the biggest criticism of pierce (besides being "responsible" "for" "the" "civil" "war")was that he tried to please too many people, and it all went horribly wrong. but i still maintain that he was a better president than zachary taylor. franklin pierce just wanted to make everyone happy, and to keep the democratic party together. he just didn't know quite how to do that.but he didn't actually seek candidacy, he was sort of shoehorned into it. here are some early signs that he might not have been the best candidate to lead our country:

priorities: "in the dormitory at night, when solitary study was the prescribed regimen, pierce was famous for bursting into other students' room to start furniture-smashing wrestling matches"

education: "as a result of pierce's carefree behavior, he ranked dead last academically in his class by the end of his sophomore year"

military finesse: "In his first serious battle, pierce sat astride a horse given to him by his concord townsmen and was ready to lead the brigade in a frontal assault on an enemy position. but a mexican artillery salvo frightened pierce's steed, causing it to buck and throwing pierce's groin violently against the saddle pommel. pierce briefly lost consciousness and began to fall from the saddle. his horse tripped and fell on pierce's knee, resulting in a serious and painful injury....in the brigade's next battle pierce, safely on foot - or so he thought - twisted the same knee injured in the previous fall and collapsed in acute pain. again his men marched by as their commander lay on the ground. this time pierce managed to hobble after his men, but by the time he reached them the serious fighting had ended. finally, pierce's brigade took part in the storming of chapultepec, the final battle of the entire campaign, but pierce did not accompany them, he lay instead in a sick tent plagued with acute diarrhea."

and ohhhh god, the accolades that pour all over abraham lincoln... abraham schlincoln: there are a gazillion books devoted to that gangly bastard, while franklin pierce gets this tiny-ass book?? but what no one wants to remember is that the only reason that the republican party even formed, and therefore the only way that lincoln could have been elected, was because pierce made such a hash of the democrats, dividing them against themselves until there was nothing "swinging-dick" buchanan could fix in time. so, you're welcome, lincoln-lovers.

but isn't this america???

aren't we supposed to value and over-expose our most attractive members even if their accomplishments are negligible or morally questionable?? where are all my franklin pierce dolls and t-shirts and bedroom slippers?

and lord knows he had enough problems without people giving him a hard time about slavery issues. all his kids died, one of them in a train accident coming home FROM A FUNERAL!! i mean, really, cut frankie some slack.

and it's partly a case of wrong time, wrong place. if this had happened a little bit later in time, there would have been one of those wacky misadventure-type biopic movies where someone is mistakenly placed in a job because of mistaken identity but remarkably overcomes knowing nothing and succeeds and becomes the best at whatever it is they do. that should have been pierce's legacy.

instead, a lot of whiners about this civil war. let me just leave you with this: without the civil war, without BOOKS about the civil war, what on earth would i get my uncle for christmas??

i rest my case.

come to my blog!

Bill Kerwin says

Franklin Pierce, only marginally a more successful president than his odious predecessor Milliard Fillmore, was certainly a good deal more likable. In fact, he was very likable. Perhaps that was part of the problem.

Certainly he was likable—and handsome too—by the time he reached Bowdoin college, a hail-fellow-well-met who enjoyed a quiet walk in the country followed by a noisy night in the tavern. Most of his fellow classmates liked him (including Nathaniel Hawthorne, who considered him a lifelong friend and wrote his campaign biography thirty years after college).

Pierce's path into politics was virtually assured, for he became a lawyer in New Hampshire about the time his father Benjamin—general of the state militia, and state legislator—was elected as the Democratic governor of New Hampshire. The Democrats dominated the state, and General Pierce held sway over the state and the party.

Michael F. Holt—author of this short biography—argues that Pierce's failed as a president because, having acquired his political experience in a Democratic state with an unusually unified party, he centered his presidential efforts on preserving party unity first, not the greater but more necessary goal of national compromise. Pierce's efforts were amiable but short-sighted, and because of those efforts, he brought us even closer to Civil War.

Professor Holt is an authority on American political parties of the 1850's, and he may very well be right. I can't really say, however, for his discussion of party matters—even in this slim volume—left me deep in the weeds. (I still have no idea what it means to be a “Hard Shell Democrat” as opposed to a “Soft Shell Democrat,” but—frankly—I no longer give a damn.) Perhaps knowing a lot about political parties in the 1850's is a handicap, not an advantage.

The only opinion I have left after reading this book is an unsophisticated one: nobody, not Pierce (or Fillmore, or Buchanan), can be blamed for drawing us closer to Civil War because the country itself had gone mad by the early 1850's. If you have trouble understanding the logic of the compromisers' Wimot

Proviso, or how any moral person could ever defend or seek to enforce the Kansas Nebraska Act's vile Fugitive Slave Law, just think of them as two crazy things crazy people do in a land where an abolitionist senator can be caned on the senate floor and five Kansas settlers can be massacred by abolitionist raiders—all in the name of freedom.

In some weird way, I think I have come to tolerate such craziness—at least better than I could have two years ago. For in this age of Trump—when the Supreme Court decrees limits on the purchasing of wedding cakes, when asylum-seeking children may be snatched from their mothers' arms, when the president declares *he can legally pardon himself*—I believe I know what it is like to live awash in craziness too.

And the last thing I want to do is blame a guy like Franklin Pierce. At the very least, unlike my own president, Franklin Pierce was certainly likable. A lover of long walks and good company. A real hail-fellow-well-met.

William Kerrigan says

This well written, engaging biography is part of the American President's Series, published by Times books. The books in the series are brief and focus primarily but not exclusively on each man's Presidency. Most are penned by very highly regarded historians of the era, and that is certainly the case here. I find the books in this series appealing in part because, while I am very interested in life stories, I rarely have the attention span devote to standard biographies which can run 800 pages in length or more. I certainly could not imagine wading through a biography of that length for someone like Franklin Pierce.

Michael Holt, one of the most highly regarded political historians of antebellum America, does a nice job recounting the life story of a President who consistently (and deservedly) ranks near the bottom of Presidential rankings lists. Holt strives to present a balanced view, and acknowledges Pierce's gifts, as well as his shortcomings. The portrait is sympathetic, but it is also honest. Holt's portrait of Pierce's character and personal qualities increased my sympathy for the man, and even caused me to consider whether the epithet frequently placed upon him for his seemingly endless desire to appease southern slaveholders—"dough face"—was entirely fair. But ultimately, Holt makes no attempt to raise Pierce's stature among Presidents, or claim that historians have judged his Presidency too harshly. Instead he concludes that "rather than see personal weakness as the source of his missteps in the White House, I attribute Pierce's most fateful political decisions to his obsession with preserving the unity of the Democratic Party."

I appreciated the volume not simply for Holt's clear explanations of the politics of the era, but also for the small insights it provided into the character of the man. I was nonetheless still grasping to understand the deep, mutual life-long friendship between Pierce, one of the nation's worst political leaders, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of its most gifted writers. I suppose it is a good reminder to us that Presidents are actually humans, after all, and they are more than simply their collective executive records.

Steven Peterson says

This is a solid biography of Franklin Pierce, often rated as in the bottom tier of American presidents. The book does a nice job of describing Pierce's ascent to political power, from his base in New Hampshire. His father had been a political figure and James followed in his footsteps.

He became president because of a deadlock in the 1852 convention. He emerged as an acceptable candidate to other factions and won. However, his presidency was not successful. In his zeal to hold the fractious Democratic party together, he ended up presiding over a slow disintegration as the country moved toward the 1856 election. He was denied renomination and led his life out fairly quietly.

A good, solid, brief biography for those who don't want to delve deeply into the subject matter. That brevity is both a strength and a weakness, since various themes cannot be fully developed.

Shawn Thrasher says

Holt does an admirable job of exploring the failures (I'm not sure if there were any successes - I certainly don't remember any from the book) of the Pierce presidency. There's actually not a whole lot to say about what Pierce did do during his one term in office, but it sounds like he basically sat back and did mostly nothing. At least some presidents dither and worry - Pierce seemed to just sit. He makes Calvin Coolidge seem like a mover and shaker, that's for sure. Nero at least fiddled while Rome burned. Pierce did a whole lot of nothing. He was a mostly forgettable legislator. If only he were as forgettable a president - he is memorable, but for his proclivity to do nothing. His post presidency, when he could have built a legacy (Carter, anyone?) he spent drinking like a fish. Franklin Pierce will (hopefully always) be the example of what NOT to do as president. Holt made his material as interesting as he could. As Julie Andrews sang: "Nothing comes from nothing." Actually, something did come from nothing: the Civil War. The 1860s say "thanks."
