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Franklin Pierce: The American Presidents Series: The 14th President, 1853-1857

Michael F. Holt

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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.

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