



Episode 1,464: The Obscure Presidents, Good and Bad

Guest: Brion McClanahan

WOODS: All right, second episode of Brion McClanahan Week. This time we're talking about unknown presidents, unknown to 99% of Americans, let's say. And I like how when you were proposing this, you said that we could just pick a few out of a hat, if you want [laughing].

MCCLANAHAN: Right.

WOODS: So why don't we pick one, Let's start with one you think is a good president people don't know about? I mean, the thing is, most people know about the bad presidents because they're the ones who are loved by everybody. But in terms of good presidents, of whom there have been some, you oftentimes haven't heard of them, especially the 19th century ones. So who would you say is the one who is, I mean, known to historians, obviously, but to the average American basically unknown, but yet who was sort of a decent fellow, all things considered?

MCCLANAHAN: Well, if you want to go to the best, it would be John Tyler. Anyone that's listened to me before knows I think John Tyler is the best president in American history.

WOODS: Okay, yeah, so let's start right there. I want you to defend that statement.

MCCLANAHAN: Right, so when you when I wrote my *Nine Presidents Who Screwed Up America*, I wanted to not only talk about the bad people, because that's — I mean, look, we're all negative: *These presidents just stink, this president* — but they said: can we have something positive at the end of the book? And I said, sure. So I picked who I thought were the best four presidents, and that was *Four Who Tried to Save Her*, and one of those four was John Tyler. And the premise of that book is that we should measure presidents on how they upheld their oath of office. That's really the only measuring stick you can use. Did they uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States? I mean, that's their job.

So I thought, okay, well, who did the best job of that? And it would have to be John Tyler, hands down. John Tyler assumed office in 1841 after William Henry Harrison died, and the cabinet called a meeting and said, okay, look, John, I know you're president, but we're going to run the show, and you just sign off whatever we do. And Tyler said, no, I'm president, so I'm going to make decisions based on what I think is right, and then you can go along with it or you can resign. He told him that. Well, eventually, they all did resign, with the exception of Daniel Webster, and he even resigned later, but that was because Henry Clay was trying to pull the strings in the background.

And the problem was that John Tyler was an old nullifier. This is a guy, the only person in the United States Senate that voted against the Force Bill, which was passed during the Nullification Crisis with South Carolina, the only one who did. He made a speech on it, and people said this is going to ruin your career, you can't do that. And we went out there and did it anyways. And he was reared at Jefferson's table, essentially. His father and Thomas Jefferson were good friends. He was an Old Republican of the early 19th century. I mean, he was like John Taylor with Caroline, but he's John Tyler.

And so he gets into office, and of course Clay thinks that we've got the Whigs in power now: the Whigs want a bank; the Whigs want internal improvements, the Whigs want tariffs. So Tyler vetoes all this stuff, and it drives Clay absolutely mad. And he was saying he was vetoing it because he said, look, this stuff's unconstitutional. I might think that internal improvements would be good. Maybe a bank would be all right. Whatever. I can think all those things, but until you tell me in the Constitution where it's constitutional, I'm going to veto it. And so he's defending the Constitution. That's what his job is.

Now, of course, there was a colleague from Virginia named John Minor Botts who wanted to impeach him for this. He wanted to impeach Tyler for simply doing his job, which was vetoing unconstitutional legislation. He's allowed to do that. And it's funny, there were several impeachment proposals during Tyler's administration because he kept doing what the Whigs didn't want them to do.

And then, of course, if you look at the one issue that I think a lot of people criticize him for is Texas, but there again, Texas in my opinion was brought into the Union constitutionally. It was through a joint resolution of Congress. Congress can admit new states to the Union. There's nothing illegal about that. The Congress, or the Senate, those who opposed him said we need a treaty to do this, and he said, well, I mean, we didn't get that. We tried; we didn't get it, but the Congress can just admit new states if they want to. They could admit Texas. It's a state. It's the state of Texas. It was just an independent state at the time. It wasn't part of any union, but it was still certainly a state just like any other state in 1776.

So I think Tyler's just a fascinating character. In his personal life, he was very upright, an interesting guy. He was married twice and very faithful to his wives. So he wasn't a scoundrel, morally. In fact, he called his plantation Sherwood Forest because he was like an outlaw there, and his grandsons, not his great grandsons, but his grandsons still live there. So he has all that personal stuff which is funny in his life too, or interesting. I just found him to be fascinating, and I think that when you look at that oath, though, there's nobody better than John Tyler.

WOODS: All right, so there's your case for John Tyler as the best president. All right, so now let's think about, let's say, names also not so well known, who maybe you don't necessarily like, maybe you do. Well, like how about — I think you mentioned Franklin Pierce as a possibility. So he's from New Hampshire. I remember reading about — gosh, I forget whether it was a bill having to do with building asylums for people with mental problems, and he vetoed it because it was unconstitutional. So I don't know if I'm remembering that right, but was he hardcore like that?

MCCLANAHAN: Absolutely. Franklin Pierce is one of those others, he's always at the bottom of the list, right? You get these presidential rankings. *Oh, we're distinguished presidents, and here are your best presidents.* And of course, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt are

right near the top. And at the bottom, you're going to have Pierce and Andrew Johnson and James Buchanan.

WOODS: Right.

MCCLANAHAN: All the bottom dwellers, right? But I like to go to the bottom dwellers, because usually they're pretty good.

WOODS: And by the way, just to situate this in everybody's mind, he's elected in 1852, just for everybody to know. Okay, so go ahead.

MCCLANAHAN: Right. Yeah, so Pierce is often criticized because he's signed into law the Kansas-Nebraska Act. And I mean, that is a sacrilege. How can you sign this into law? And he's supposedly a "doughface," right? The term is a "doughface," a Northern man with Southern principles. He was very good friends with Jefferson Davis. Jefferson Davis was his Secretary of War. But Pierce, here's another guy that had just a horrible personal life. All of his kids were killed. His wife died when he's — I mean, just everybody died in his life. In fact, his last son was killed while he was en route to Washington to become president. He was killed in a train accident, decapitated. I mean, just horrible. So you've got that, which of course is interesting to read about.

But Pierce did veto that asylum bill, because he said, look, if we pass this thing, essentially, what we're going to say is that the general government can be in charge of health care. And do we want the general government in charge of all hospitals, all health care in the United States? Now, think about that. That was 1854, I think, is when he vetoed that bill. Think about that today. I mean, we talk about health care all the time. 1854, Franklin Pierce was saying, hey, if we do this, we're going to nationalize health care, and so I'm going to veto this bill. It's so prescient.

And then, of course, he also vetoed several internal improvements bills. He actually vetoed six of those. So he's blocking internal improvements. This is something we don't even blink an eye on anymore. If the federal government wants to spend money on an Interstate Highway System, sure. They want to spend money on the road in your neighborhood in front of your house, they're going to get federal funds to fix that road, yeah, why not? But I mean, Pierce and others would say, well, how does that benefit New Hampshire if I'm building a road in Alabama? I mean, am I going to drive on that road? Is anybody else going to drive on that road? No. But — that's not generally from Alabama. So how would that benefit the US, or how would that benefit the taxpayers in other states? These are state responsibilities.

So he's rock-solid on the Constitution, good at foreign policy. He was certainly — now, some people would say, well, he's got the Ostend Manifesto that's trying to acquire Cuba, and there's these filibusters that he had no roll in. But certainly, he was much more interested in a noninterventionist foreign policy than modern presidents, so I think that's laudable. So all these 19th century presidents before Lincoln were very much, for the most part, noninterventionist. If you look at Pierce, if you look at Buchanan and Taylor, these people were very much interested in a foreign policy that would be more in line with, say, George Washington than Woodrow Wilson.

WOODS: All right, so let's say something about — let me see. Who's the other one? I had a list of them right here. Yeah, okay, how about — okay, here's one everybody hates, and I don't mean Nixon, because in their heart of hearts, the establishment still kind of respects Nixon on some level, because they admit he did do some things that they would have to approve of. But I'm thinking James Buchanan, right after Pierce, right after Pierce. You think they didn't like Pierce? Oh, you haven't seen anything. Is it just that Buchanan let the South go and, at least as it was happening, he wasn't going to use force to bring states back in? Is that what it is?

MCCLANAHAN: I think that's part of it, but you know, Gutzman doesn't like Buchanan either. And, look, I think it's that, and it's also Dred Scott. The whole issue of Dred Scott, where Buchanan was actually involved in the decision — which is horrible. I mean, look, the fact that the President and the Supreme Court Chief Justice are trying to negotiate how they're going to rule so that they can supposedly —

WOODS: Yeah, yeah, no, that's no good. Nobody denies that.

MCCLANAHAN: Right. But one thing I'll say about that, in Buchanan's defense, though, here's a guy from Pennsylvania — again, he's a Northerner. He's considered a doughface, but he really wanted to try to end the slavery controversy. He thought it was an annoyance. We've got to solve this thing somehow, right? These two sections are getting really antagonistic. They're fighting out in Kansas. We've got to come up with some solution that will stop this thing. And I am a national president. I'm in charge of a national party, the Democrat Party, right? So we've got Northerners and Southerners. Let's come together on this thing and try to figure this out. And so that was Dred Scott. Now, it's a miserable disaster, and it's a horrible view of due process. But I think, in just looking back and trying to understand what he was doing, I can understand it; it was just the wrong way to do it.

But otherwise, I mean Buchanan — look, when you make the statement that secession caused the war, well, if that's true, then why didn't we have war between December of 1860 and April of 1861? Or why didn't we have war between December and March, is more accurate? Because Buchanan wasn't going to go and use force to bring the South back in the Union. So that simply blows apart the entire argument that secession caused war, because for nearly four months we didn't have it. And Buchanan was saying, look, we're not going — his attorney general, Jeremiah Black, had written a defense of Buchanan's actions and saying: look, secession is illegal, but so is using force to stop it. That's also illegal, so we can't do that.

So that was Buchanan's position, and I mean, it's peace, right? He did try to resupply Fort Sumter at one point, and that ship was shot at, so he turned it around and didn't do anything else. That was it. That was January of 1861. He didn't make another move.

So Buchanan's position was that — I mean, we only had seven states out of the Union at that point. We still had North Carolina in the Union, Virginia, Tennessee. All those states were still in the Union. So he's saying maybe we can work this out and negotiate and get them back in at some point and not have to go to a shooting match over this. And I think that's the more admirable position than simply saying, we're going to send in the troops to Fort Pickens and Fort Sumter and we're just going to hope it settles itself out. Lincoln knew exactly what would happen because he was told: if you send supplies into Sumpter, if you send supplies to Fort Pickens, it's going to cause war. And it did. And so Lincoln knew exactly what he was getting into, and I think Buchanan is good on that.

He was also good on domestic policy in terms of limited government. I mean, he was certainly in line with the Democrat position of the 19th century in maintaining a limited, strict construction of the Constitution when it came to internal improvements and things of that — Now, he was pro-tariff. I will say this. Buchanan was pro-tariff. The Morrill Tariff was passed before he left office. So, from Pennsylvania, he liked the idea of tariffs, but he generally wasn't as bad as people make him out to be.

WOODS: Let's say you're assessing the first half of the 19th century and you have to find the worst of the presidents. Who would that be?

MCCLANAHAN: The first half, so you're saying up to 1850? Who would the worst be?

WOODS: Yeah.

MCCLANAHAN: Andrew Jackson.

WOODS: Really?

MCCLANAHAN: [laughing] Yes, yes. If you look at federal power — a close second is Polk. But Polk at least we had an independent Treasury established during the Polk administration, which was good. The tariff was reduced, which was good. But Jackson, other than the bank veto — and you've got to understand why he did it. Jackson didn't veto the bank because he had some moral qualms about the bank. He vetoed the bank because Henry Clay was for the bank. That's it. Jackson — in fact, David Crockett pointed this out. David Crockett was his arch political enemy. A lot of people don't know that, but Crockett did not like Andrew Jackson. They're both from Tennessee, and Crockett thought that Jackson was a shyster, right? He doesn't have any principles. And so he thought the Jackson was a bank man. He thought Jackson was a guy that was for all these things.

But once you got on his personal enemies list, it was terrible. Now, Jackson, there's a reason why we have the whole Whig Party, because of Andrew Jackson. We wouldn't have had it unless Jackson was threatening to use force against South Carolina. So this is why he was called King Andrew, and you can certainly make a case that that was the intellectual forbearer of Abraham Lincoln and his ultimately using force against the South in '61. So Jackson was abusing the Constitution, while at the same time rhetorically saving the Constitution. Now, I mean, that's not a good thing to do, and I know that that Brad Birzer likes Jackson. I like Brad's book on Jackson. But Jackson's in my *Nine Presidents* book, and he was one of the ones, too, that people pointed to and said, "Well, how can you say Andrew Jackson is a bad president?"

There's also the whole issue of the Bank of the United States, when it finally was going out of business, essentially, and Jackson illegally withdrew all the deposits from it. He's breaking the law, and nobody called him out for that. I mean, the two Secretaries of the Treasury didn't want to do it. Finally, Taney says, I'll do it, and so that's that, but Jackson was really problematic for central power. We have to remember that in 1787, Jefferson called Jackson a dangerous man. That was long before Jackson was president. Jefferson could already see that Jackson was going to be problematic, and he ultimately was.

WOODS: I think, yeah, Brad likes a lot of the Andrew Jackson, the man, and some of his exploits before becoming president, and I think there are some aspects of his presidency that he can approve of, but not quite all. I mean, I look at Jackson, and you're right, I mean, obviously, his views of executive power are not mine. But also, I think Calhoun at that time was concerned about this idea that the president, which I believe is how Andrew Jackson portrayed himself, he's the president of the American people. Like he conceives of himself as being above the other, like, for example, senators and representatives, because you just represent some dinky portion of the country, but I'm the person who represents the will of the entire people in the actual aggregate. And Calhoun was saying there is no such thing as the American people in the aggregate. We have a set of societies here, each of whom is distinct, each of which is distinct from the other, so just this whole way of thinking is bound to produce problems. And of course, the handling of the Nullification Crisis and the Force Bill are certainly not ideal.

But at the same time, I mean, he's not a big-government president in the sense that he's not launching any major initiatives. I mean, no president of the early 19th century did. But there was a slogan associated with Jackson, which was, "Equal rights." But what equal rights meant in that context was everybody is equal in the sense that nobody gets a damn thing. Like nobody gets special privileges from the government. That's how he viewed equal rights. And so the working man, what he should be advocating is simply that there's no special privilege that builds up monopolies, and that's your equal right. So I mean, I don't find anything to object to on that.

MCCLANAHAN: No, and well, you asked about presidential power. I actually like Andrew Jackson personally. I mean, he's in my Politically Incorrect Guide to Real American Heroes as a real American hero. So Jackson, personally — and you're correct about that. I mean, he didn't want corporate welfare, for example, so you're not going to abuse the laboring class by giving a bunch of rich guys protective tariffs or a bank so they can get richer. And so this is why some of the lefties kind of like — this is why Schlesinger kind of liked Jackson, because he's supposedly this guy that's this early progressive, in essence. But I mean, it's a different kind of thing. It's not what the progressives would want. So certainly, I think Jackson's interesting on a personal level; it's just as a president, his abuse of power was just way over the top. So that's where I would say he's the worst.

But you're right. No 19th century president, even the worst of the worst, even Alexander Hamilton — not a president, but even Alexander Hamilton would not compare to the current crop that we have in DC. I would take Alexander Hamilton over Ocasio-Cortez any day of the week. He would be so much better than her.

WOODS: Yeah, of course. Who wouldn't?

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah, so that's without question.

WOODS: All right, so that's your worst. Now, how about Zachary Taylor? So now we're going to 1848.

MCCLANAHAN: Zachary Taylor, I love. Zachary Taylor viewed himself as another George Washington. I think of any of the presidents in that period, he almost could have pulled it off. People don't realize how famous Zachary Taylor actually was when he was elected president. This is the guy that helped win the war with Mexico, and he had a tremendous amount of

political capital. And Polk knew it, which is why he sacked him and tried to keep him out of politics, because he thought, this guy is going to become president.

Now, there's a couple of things I like about Zachary Taylor. Number one, when he was going to the inauguration, so he's riding in a carriage with Polk — and Polk writes this in his diary. "Had a conversation with Zachary Taylor." And it's something that shocked me, and I'm going to paraphrase, but he says, Zachary Taylor essentially said that he thinks California and Oregon should just secede from the United States. I mean, that's great. Can you imagine a world without California? If Taylor had had his wish, we wouldn't have had California at that point. I mean, wouldn't the United States be so much better off without California? So California can go.

But now as president, Taylor pushed to have California admitted as a free state, because he said, look, this is what California wants. So he was into self-determination. The one area that Southerners didn't like Taylor was that when they were threatening to secede in 1850, he told all the people in Texas, I'm going to hang you if you try to secede. So a lot of people think he's heavy-handed there.

But Taylor certainly had the Washington view of foreign policy. If you read his speeches on the issue, he was rock-solid on that. He was interested in a real union, meaning that he wanted the Union to benefit all and burden all equally. He was certainly not someone who was trying to abuse powers as executive, and I think that's something that's laudable about Taylor. But he only lasted a little over a year in office, so I mean, we don't know what would have happened. But Taylor had enough political capital, I think, to keep the United States together in a way that George Washington was able to do, as well, back in the 1790s, when things could have blown up then, too. I mean, look, things were could have blown up in 1850, and I think Taylor had the ability to keep things together without having violence. And I think that's one of the best things about his character and his personality.

WOODS: All right, one more before we wrap up for today, because if I'm having you on five times this week, we can't do hour-long episodes each time. I'd have to start paying my guests to come and do this. But let's go back to the late 18th century, because there was a series on TV that I didn't watch on John Adams, and a lot of people really, really liked it. They didn't necessarily like him, but they liked the series. I don't know if you saw that series. But I'm curious about your opinions of John Adams. And maybe he's a guy who had some merits outside office but then was a lousy president. I'd be curious to get your thoughts on him.

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah, I actually enjoyed the HBO series, as well. It was really well done. Some of the scenes in that are so good. The one where they're at the moment where they vote for the Declaration, it is just powerful, because we have this idea that, of course, everyone was cheering. And we have fireworks now and hotdogs and ball games, but when they made that vote, it looked like every single one of them was just going to have a heart attack, because they thought to themselves, oh my gosh, what did we just do? This is serious. And so it was dead silence. Great filmmaking.

But besides that point, Adams takes a lot of heat, of course, and rightfully so for signing the Alien and Sedition Acts into law. And so that's his one failing. But I think that when you look at what Adams was trying to do, he was trying to avoid war with the French and the British, which was very difficult to do. And so I think we have to give him credit for his reluctance to just rush into a war with France after the XYZ Affair. So I think that's something. Adams is

saying, no, we don't want to do that. That would just be stupid. The Federalists are pushing for it. They're forcing him to call up the military so they can go fight the French, and Adams is saying, wait, wait, let's try and negotiate. Of course, at the same time, Washington comes out of retirement, and Hamilton is now put in charge of the United States Army, and Adams is still trying to send a diplomatic delegation to France so they can work out these differences with the French government.

And ultimately, that happens. The Treaty of Mortefontaine in 1800 settles all the problems with the French that we had. We were perpetual allies. I mean, people have to remember how dangerous France was in the late 18th century. This is the French Revolutionary period and then of course leading into the Napoleonic Era, and France is extremely unstable. They're at war with everybody. So the United States theoretically then is at war with everybody too, because we have a perpetual alliance with them. So Adams is trying to get rid of that problem, and I think we should give him credit for that.

Again, I would take John Adams over anybody in the last half century and the presidency any day of the week. He was a real republican in that he believed in disinterested statesmanship. He was someone that didn't necessarily — you know, he was for bigger government in the 1790s, but bigger government in the 1790s would be like — I mean, Hamilton had one employee in the Treasury. So can you imagine the Treasury Department having two employees? I mean, this is what we're talking about with "big government" back in the 1790. So Adams was great, I think, overall on foreign policy; he was just a really bad in that one instance with the Alien and Sedition Acts, and rightfully so. Lost office because of it.

WOODS: All right, we're going to call it a day today, but I want people to know about *The Brion McClanahan Show* and about your McClanahan Academy, so say a word about that.

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah, all right. If you want to follow *The Brion McClanahan Show*, just go to BrionMcClanahan.com, that's BrionMcClanahan.com. You can subscribe to the podcast there. I podcast usually twice a week, if I'm really busy once a week. But it's just a 30-minute drive-time podcast where it's all monologue, so there's no callers. It's just me. And so I talk about all kinds of things. But you've got that, and then, of course, I've got my McClanahan Academy, which is how I help monetize the podcast. So if you want to go out there, it's always free to enroll there, but it's a great way to get courses. I have seven courses now available, and you can use the coupon code WOODS and get 25% off any of those courses. You get one free for signing up, but you can get 25% off any of the courses I have for sale there. A lot of great stuff, so you can hop on over there and get more of me there as well.

WOODS: All right, excellent. So we'll have links to that at TomWoods.com/1464. All right, thanks, Brion. We'll talk to you tomorrow.

MCCLANAHAN: Thanks, Tom.