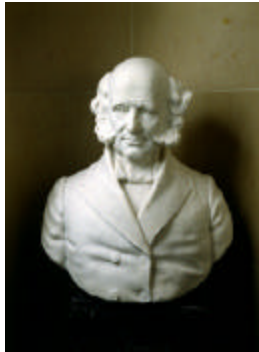


Vice Presidents of the United States

Martin Van Buren (1833-1837)

Citation: Mark O. Hatfield, with the Senate Historical Office. *Vice Presidents of the United States, 1789-1993* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), pp. 105-116.

Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.



U.S. Senate Collection

a *true man* with no guile

—Andrew Jackson on Martin Van Buren¹

you were a great intriguer—the author of sundry plots

—William L. Marcy to Martin Van Buren²

Few people ever *really* knew Martin Van Buren. The impeccable attire, ready wit, and unflinching tact that set him apart from his contemporaries masked a nagging sense of insecurity that dogged him throughout his political career. His father, a tavern keeper of modest means, had been able to provide him with only a rudimentary education. One of Van Buren's better-educated associates observed that his "knowledge of books outside of his profession was more limited than that of any other public man" he had ever known and that Van Buren never prepared a state paper without asking a friend to "revise and correct that document."

Van Buren received his real education in the turbulent and factious world of New York politics, and he was an apt pupil. He learned to hold his counsel as others debated the hotly contested issues of the day, carefully observing the course of a debate and weighing all of the issues before staking out a position of his own. "Even after deciding on a course of action," one scholar has observed, "Van Buren might move with an air of evasiveness." Circumspect to a fault, he "enjoyed a name for noncommittalism that survived when most other things about him were forgotten."³

Reviled as a "schemer" and a master "manipulator" by contemporaries who lacked (and probably envied) his uncanny political acumen, he was known throughout his career by an unparalleled assortment of nicknames, none of them entirely favorable. But "the Little Magician" (also known as "the American Talleyrand," "the Red Fox of Kinderhook," the

"Mistletoe Politician," and by a variety of other sobriquets)⁴ left a solid record of accomplishment that few of his better-known fellows could rival. More than any other individual of his time, Van Buren realized the importance of party organization, discipline, and political patronage. He engineered Andrew Jackson's victory in the 1828 presidential election and later became a trusted confidant and adviser to "Old Hickory," a relationship that continued after Van Buren became vice president in 1833. No previous vice president enjoyed a greater measure of influence than Van Buren, and no vice president, in over three decades, had assumed that office as the "heir apparent."

Van Buren's Early Years

Martin Van Buren was born on December 5, 1782, in the predominantly Dutch community of Kinderhook, New York. His father, Abraham, was a tavern keeper and farmer of modest means; his mother, Maria Goes⁵ Van Alen, was a widow with two sons from her first marriage. Both were of undiluted Dutch ancestry, a fact that Van Buren took care to note in his *Autobiography*. One of the six children born to Abraham and Maria, Martin grew up in a crowded household, lodged above his father's tavern. From his father, a resolute opponent of Federalism, he inherited his genial manners and political creed but very little else. Dilatory about collecting his debts and generous beyond his means, Abraham barely supported his large family. Young Martin inherited his ambition from his mother, who insisted that her sons receive the best education possible, given their limited resources. He attended a local school until the age of fifteen, then served as an apprentice to Francis Sylvester, a local lawyer. During his apprenticeship, Van Buren became involved in local politics, attending his district's 1800 Republican convention and helping to elect John Peter Van Ness to the United States House of Representatives in 1801. These activities strained his relationship with Sylvester, a prominent Federalist, and Van Buren terminated their arrangement after the election. Van Ness, grateful for Van Buren's efforts on his behalf, paid his young supporter's travel and expenses while he finished his legal studies in New York City, clerking for the congressman's brother, William. New York City politics fascinated Van Buren, but he returned to Kinderhook shortly after his admission to the bar in 1803 to establish a legal practice with his half brother, James Van Alen. In leaving the city he also sought to distance himself from the intraparty warfare that infected the New York Republican coalition after the 1800 presidential election. In Kinderhook, much of Van Buren's time was spent defending tenants and small landholders in suits against the powerful Livingston clan. The Livingstons, landed gentry whose control of the New York legislature had helped them expand their extensive holdings by questionable means, had retained the best legal minds in the state. Rigorous and careful preparation on Van Buren's part helped him prevail against these notable attorneys and won him the respect of De Witt Clinton, Governor George Clinton's nephew and political heir. Van Buren backed Clinton's candidate, future Vice President Daniel D. Tompkins, in the 1807 gubernatorial race and received for his efforts an appointment as Columbia County surrogate on March 20, 1808.⁶

In 1808, Van Buren married Hannah Hoes, a distant relative, and settled in Hudson, the Columbia County seat. The marriage was a happy one, notwithstanding the frequent

absences imposed by the demands of Martin's career, but by the time their fifth son was born in 1817, Hannah had contracted a fatal case of tuberculosis. Van Buren was profoundly affected by her death in 1819; although much in demand as an escort and dinner companion, particularly during the years that he lived in Washington, he never remarried.⁷

Van Buren served as Columbia County surrogate from 1808 until 1812, when he was elected to the New York senate. During the War of 1812, he was an avid supporter of the administration's war effort, offering legislation to facilitate mobilization of the state's defenses. He opposed the Federalists' antiwar stance and broke with his mentor, De Witt Clinton, after learning that Clinton had solicited Federalist support for his 1812 presidential bid. In 1815, Van Buren became state attorney general and moved his family to Albany. He held that office until 1819 and continued to serve in the state senate until 1820, delegating his growing legal practice to his junior partner, Benjamin F. Butler.⁸ Van Buren soon emerged as the guiding force of the "Bucktail" faction, one of several groups jockeying for control of the New York Republican party. The Bucktails, opponents of De Witt Clinton who took their name from the distinctive plumes they affixed to their hats, rapidly gained in influence under Van Buren's tutelage. A Bucktail-controlled convention made major revisions in New York's constitution in 1821-1822, expanding the suffrage and curbing aristocratic influence, reforms that helped break De Witt Clinton's hold on the state Republican party. In 1821, Van Buren won election to the United States Senate, leaving behind a formidable political organization, popularly known as the "Albany Regency," that would manage the New York Republican party—and through it, the state—while he was away. The Regency maintained rigid discipline, rewarding loyalty with patronage appointments and disciplining errant members. Although centered in Albany, the organization's control also extended to local political organizations and clubs. Powerful as Van Buren's apparatus became, "It was not," one scholar of the period emphasizes, "so much the rewarding of partisans and the mass lopping off of rebellious heads that explained the Regency success as it was the skilful, highly judicious manner in which the power was exercised." Regency leaders took "the prejudices and feelings of local communities" into account in making their appointments and exercised equal care in making removals.⁹

Senator Van Buren: The "Little Magician"

Once in Washington, Van Buren set about organizing the New York congressional delegation, a difficult undertaking in light of the fact that John Taylor, the unofficial dean of the delegation and Speaker of the House Representatives, was firmly in the Clinton camp. In an effort to curb Taylor's influence, Van Buren helped orchestrate the election of Virginia Representative Philip Barbour as House Speaker during the Seventeenth Congress, a narrow victory that increased his own influence while cementing his ties to Virginia Republicans. He tried but failed to block the appointment of a Federalist as postmaster of Albany, but his effort to derail the nomination, chronicled at length by the press, enhanced his reputation.¹⁰

In the 1824 presidential election, Van Buren backed the Republican caucus nominee, Treasury Secretary William H. Crawford. The two had a great deal in common: Crawford was a states' rights advocate, a strict constructionist, and—a consideration of overriding importance to Van Buren—a dedicated party man. But the Republican coalition was rapidly splintering, and many Republicans, calling for reform of the nominating process, refused to heed the will of the caucus. Four other candidates ultimately entered the race, all claiming membership in the party of Jefferson: Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Tennessee Senator Andrew Jackson. Consumed by his single-minded effort to secure Crawford's election, even after his candidate became so seriously ill that he could neither see, hear, nor walk, Van Buren was bitterly disappointed when the House of Representatives elected Adams president.¹¹ After the election, Van Buren, as the new acknowledged leader of the "Crawford" Republicans, also known as "Radicals," kept his peace while others denounced the "corrupt bargain" with Henry Clay that many suspected had elevated Adams to the White House. He voted to confirm Clay as secretary of state, but he broke his silence after Adams outlined an ambitious domestic and foreign policy agenda in his first annual address. Van Buren particularly objected to the president's plan to send representatives to a conference of South and Central American delegates in Panama and enlisted the aid of Vice President John C. Calhoun and his allies in an effort to prevent the confirmation of delegates to the conference. The Senate ultimately confirmed the nominees, but the debate over the Panama mission had helped forge a tentative coalition of "Radicals" and Calhoun supporters under Van Buren's leadership.¹²

In December 1826, the Little Magician formalized his alliance with Calhoun, who had already pledged his support for Andrew Jackson in the forthcoming presidential race. Each man had his own agenda: Calhoun intended to succeed Jackson, after serving a second term as vice president; Van Buren, alarmed by Adams' grandiose agenda and convinced that Republicans had strayed from the Jeffersonian creed, intended to restore the party to its "first principles." Jackson, he was convinced, should carry the reinvigorated party's standard in 1828. "If Gen Jackson . . . will put his election on old party grounds, preserve the old systems, avoid if not condemn the practices of the last campaign," he predicted, "we can by adding his personal popularity to the yet remaining force of old party feeling, not only succeed in electing him but our success when achieved will be worth something."¹³

By December 1827, Van Buren had assumed control of the Jackson campaign. The candidate remained in the background while the Little Magician orchestrated a battle plan of unprecedented energy and vigor. His campaigning was, in the words of one scholar, "little short of brilliant." Van Buren plunged wholeheartedly into the contest, serving as fund raiser, strategist, publicist, and counselor. Several states had, prior to the election, revised their election laws to expand the franchise. With parades, rallies, speeches, and calls for "reform," Van Buren and his lieutenants mesmerized these first-time voters, as well as others who had become disenchanted with the administration. "[T]he American people," a Jackson scholar concluded, "loved the performance put on for them."¹⁴

Keeping his fragile coalition together represented Van Buren's most difficult challenge, apart from persuading the candidate to suffer in dignified silence as the Adams camp levelled increasingly virulent attacks on his character. The growing protectionist sentiment in the West and in the Northeast posed particular problems for Van Buren, who could not afford to alienate southern free-trade advocates. Courting both camps, he studiously avoided making a definitive pronouncement on the tariff, even as he deftly guided a protectionist bill through the Senate. The 1828 tariff, known in the South as the "Tariff of Abominations," reassured westerners, who might otherwise have remained in the "Adams-Clay" fold, that a Jackson administration would take their interests into account. Van Buren realized that protectionism was anathema to southern agriculturalists, but he also realized that most southerners regarded Jackson as the lesser of two evils. As one scholar has conceded, during the tariff debate Van Buren "said some very equivocal things to Southerners," helping them convince themselves that, once elected, Old Hickory would support tariff reform.¹⁵

Secretary of State Van Buren

Jackson won an impressive victory in 1828, widely heralded as a triumph of the "common man." Writing his *Autobiography* many years after the fact, Van Buren attributed the outcome of this historic election to the "zealous union between that portion of the republican party who . . . had shown themselves willing to sacrifice personal preferences to its harmony, the numerous supporters of Gen. Jackson . . . and the friends of Mr. Calhoun . . . strengthened by the mismanagement of the administration." Van Buren achieved a personal victory as well, winning election as governor of New York. But he served less than two months in this position, resigning to accept an appointment as secretary of state in the new administration.¹⁶

Van Buren was easily the most capable individual in Jackson's cabinet, an assortment of second-rank appointees chosen to achieve sectional and ideological balance.¹⁷ During his two years as secretary of state from 1829 to 1831, he became one of the president's most trusted advisers. He arrived in the capital shortly after Jackson's inauguration to find the cabinet—and Washington society—at odds over Mrs. John C. Calhoun's adamant refusal to socialize with the wife of Secretary of War John Eaton, a woman with a spirited disposition and a notorious reputation. Several cabinet wives had followed suit, avoiding official functions for fear of encountering the tainted couple. The "Petticoat War" was, as Van Buren realized, much more than a dispute over protocol or public morals; it was a symptom of the deep divisions in an administration that included both free-trade advocates and protectionists. The tension became even more pronounced after Jackson delivered his first annual message. His speech, prepared with Van Buren's assistance, convinced Vice President Calhoun and his allies that they would obtain no relief from the Tariff of Abominations. As for Van Buren, he suspected—correctly, as it turned out—that Calhoun was somehow behind the talk of "nullification" emanating from South Carolina.

Van Buren at first tried to cure what he called "the Eaton malaria," the malaise that threatened to paralyze the administration, by entertaining the Eatons. As a widower with

no wife to object if he showed courtesy to a woman of questionable repute, he had nothing to lose by entertaining Mrs. Eaton and everything to gain, given the high regard that Jackson felt for Peggy and her husband. He was no match for the formidable Floride Calhoun, however, and he soon became *persona non grata* among the Calhoun set, but his gallantry endeared him to the president.¹⁸ Accompanying Jackson on horseback for their customary rides throughout the countryside surrounding Washington, Van Buren became the president's sounding board and friend, offering well-timed and perceptive counsel to the care-burdened and lonely old hero. He helped craft the president's memorable toast: "The Union: It must be preserved" that electrified the April 13, 1830, banquet commemorating Jefferson's birthday, and he helped persuade Jackson to run for a second term.

Calhoun simmered with resentment as the man he considered a "weasel" gained the upper hand in a rivalry that was becoming increasingly bitter. Van Buren, although every bit as ambitious as Calhoun, became increasingly discomfited at the widespread speculation that he, and not Calhoun, would succeed Jackson as president. Recoiling at the thought that his opponents might interpret his labors on Jackson's behalf as a crude form of electioneering, he informed the president in late March of 1831 that "there is but one thing" that would bring peace to Jackson's troubled administration: "my resignation." Old Hickory was at first reluctant to accept Van Buren's resignation, but eventually realized that the gesture offered him the opportunity to purge his cabinet of Calhoun partisans. Van Buren's departure precipitated the mass resignation of the entire cabinet, except for Postmaster General William Barry. The new cabinet was distinctly more sympathetic to Jackson—and to Van Buren. As a reward for his "highly patriotic" sacrifice, the Little Magician received an appointment as minister to England.¹⁹

Van Buren sailed for England before the Senate confirmed his nomination. His easy, elegant manners made him an instant hit in London. Almost immediately, he received the British foreign minister's pledge to respect the rulings of the panel arbitrating the longstanding boundary dispute between Maine and New Brunswick. Jackson had predicted that Van Buren's enemies would not dare oppose this appointment, for fear that "the people in mass would take you up and elect you vice Pres.," but, in late February 1832, Van Buren learned that the Senate had in fact rejected his nomination, with Vice President Calhoun casting the deciding vote. Jackson was furious when he heard the news but, after sober reflection, realized that he now had ample justification for removing Calhoun from the ticket in the coming election. He had already settled on Van Buren as his next vice president, but Calhoun's effrontery strengthened his resolve. "The people will properly resent the insult offered to the Executive, and the injury intended to our foreign relations, in your rejection," he consoled Van Buren in mid-February, "by placing you in the chair of the very man whose casting vote rejected you."²⁰ Calhoun, his presidential prospects rapidly dimming as a consequence of his role in the nullification controversy, resigned before the end of his term—the first vice president to do so—to take a seat in the Senate. Once Van Buren's most formidable rival for the soul of the organization soon to be known as the Democratic party, he had become a sectional leader and would remain a sectional leader for the rest of his life.

The Election of 1832

Van Buren found every reason imaginable to remain abroad after learning of his rejection by the Senate. He could not break his lease or abruptly discharge his servants, he protested, nor could he pack up his household on such short notice. But his biographer suggests that he delayed his departure because he believed that the "opposition would splinter . . . if left alone; it stood a good chance of coalescing if he returned with undue haste for vindication."²¹ Touring the Continent with his son John, Van Buren was still abroad when Democratic delegates assembled at Baltimore on May 21, 1832, to choose a vice-presidential candidate. Although antitariff southern Democrats had serious reservations about Van Buren, Jackson's sentiments prevailed. By an overwhelming margin, the convention chose Van Buren on the first ballot.²²

Finally returning home in July 1832, the Little Magician was immediately summoned to Washington. Jackson needed his help in drafting a message to Congress explaining his impending veto of a bill to recharter the Second Bank of the United States. Van Buren approved of the veto message, a ringing denunciation of the bank as an instrument of privilege. At Jackson's request, he attended the Senate and the House of Representatives on July 10, in order to lobby against the inevitable attempt to override the veto. Also at Jackson's request, he lobbied for a compromise tariff designed to keep would-be nullifiers in the Jacksonian camp. Successful in both efforts, he departed for New York after Congress adjourned. He remained in New York until shortly before the inauguration, attempting to reconcile die-hard New York protectionists to the compromise tariff.²³ The 1832 election was, as one scholar of the period has observed, a referendum on the Second Bank of the United States, the first presidential election in which the candidates submitted a single, specific question to the electorate. Jackson was a "hard-money" man, deeply suspicious of banks, credit, and paper money after suffering near ruin in an early land speculation venture. Regarding the Second Bank of the United States, a government-chartered but privately owned institution, as an instrument of aristocratic, monied interests, he would have announced his intention to destroy the bank in his first annual message had his advisers not counseled restraint. Fully confident that the voters would signal their assent by electing him to a second term, Jackson had vetoed the bank recharter bill before the election. National Republican candidate Henry Clay, who considered the bank essential to the nation's fiscal stability, was quick to make an issue of the veto. Clay's partisans took aim at the Little Magician, as well, charging that his feats of legerdemain had secured the throne for a president who had abused his office. Political cartoons showed Jackson, Van Buren, and their cronies assaulting the bank with a battering ram, Van Buren crowning Jackson, and "King Andrew the First" brandishing the "veto." These and similar images helped make the contest one of the liveliest, if not the best illustrated, in the nation's history.

But the National Republicans were no match for the well-organized party that Van Buren had helped create. One scholar has suggested that the majority of American voters still

regarded Jackson as their champion, even though they may well have approved of the bank, which provided the nation with the stable currency so essential to its prosperity. The Democrats, now a full-fledged political party, won a solid victory, although by a somewhat smaller margin than in 1828. Jackson was easily reelected, and Van Buren won a substantial victory over Clay's running mate, John Sergeant.²⁴

Vice President Van Buren

Jackson had every reason to rejoice at the outcome of the election. The voters had, he believed, given him a mandate to destroy the bank, and he was rid of Calhoun. In Van Buren, Jackson had a vice president more to his liking. Old Hickory respected his second vice president and seems to have felt sincere affection for him, as well. Some longtime Jackson cronies were deeply jealous of the New Yorker, who, as one critic put it, stuck "close to the President as a blistering plaster."²⁵ But Van Buren was not, as critics of both men so frequently alleged, the "power-behind-the-throne." Jackson was a formidable tactician in his own right and a man of resolute convictions, fully capable of determining his own course of action. Van Buren was not his only confidant; throughout his two terms as president, Jackson also relied on his "Kitchen Cabinet," an informal group of trusted friends, supporters, kinsmen, and hangers-on, for advice and moral support.

In orchestrating the transfer of government deposits from the Bank of the United States to state depositories, for example, Jackson rejected the cautious course that Van Buren proposed in favor of the more precipitate approach advocated by Amos Kendall, the fourth auditor of the treasury. After Jackson informed his advisers early in his first term that he intended to remove the deposits, Kendall urged immediate action. Van Buren, sensitive to the political and financial repercussions of a hasty withdrawal but reluctant to challenge the president, advised Jackson to wait at least until the Twenty-third Congress convened in December 1833. Apprehensive—with good reason, as it turned out—that he would be regarded both as the author of this controversial move and as the pawn of Wall Street bankers who expected to benefit from the Philadelphia-based bank's demise, Van Buren was conspicuously absent from Washington that fall. The opposition would inevitably "relieve the question . . . from the influence of your well deserved popularity with the people," he wrote Jackson from New York in September, "by attributing the removal of the deposits to the solicitat[i]ons of myself and the monied junto in N. York, and as it is not your habit to play into the enemies hands you will not I know request me to come down unless there is some adequate inducement for my so doing."²⁶

Van Buren did, however, enjoy a greater measure of influence in the administration than any previous vice president. He helped Treasury Secretary Roger B. Taney coax the president into a less belligerent posture when Jackson, outraged at France's failure to comply with the 1832 treaty for the payment of U.S. claims against France, threatened to seek congressional authorization to issue letters of marque, a move that Taney feared might lead to war. Upset that Jackson failed to follow his advice about France, Secretary of State Louis McLane resigned in protest. Van Buren then helped Jackson draft a reply to McLane's letter of resignation and suggested his longtime ally Senator John Forsyth of

Georgia to fill the position. Van Buren shouldered a workload that, in the words of a biographer, "would have crushed lesser men." In addition to his labors in the Senate, he spent a considerable amount of time "advising members of the cabinet, ghosting significant parts of Jackson's messages, acting as the president's chief advisor on patronage and foreign affairs, feeling his way around the Kitchen Cabinet, while always keeping his eye on New York."²⁷

Senate Committee Elections

Presiding over the Senate was easily Van Buren's most challenging and frustrating task, one that demanded all of his legendary tact and good humor. Jackson faced sustained opposition during his second term from an opposition coalition of National Republicans, nullifiers, states' rights advocates, and eventually from disaffected Democrats who came to regard him as an overreaching despot. By 1834, these disparate elements would unite to form a new party, calling themselves "Whigs" to signal their opposition to a chief executive they called King Andrew. The rhetoric was particularly heated in the Senate, where the opposition commanded a slim majority after the 1832 election. The coalition's ranks included such luminaries as Henry Clay, the bank's most avid defender; Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster, like Jackson a staunch unionist but also a defender of the bank; and Calhoun, the author of nullification.²⁸

Van Buren began his duties in the Senate on December 16, 1833, two weeks after the Twenty-third Congress convened. Having served there from 1821 to 1828, he was familiar with the body's customs and procedures. He knew that the vice president was not expected to attend the Senate for several days at the beginning of each Congress, a practice that allowed the Senate to attend to organizational matters and appoint committees without interference from the executive branch. But in 1833 a unique combination of events prevented the Senate from attending to this important task before Van Buren arrived.

Under normal circumstances, President pro tempore Hugh Lawson White would have appointed the committee members and chairmen at the start of the Twenty-third Congress. The rule adopted in December 1828 governing the appointment of committees directed that "[t]he President pro tempore . . . shall appoint the committees of the Senate; but if there be no President pro tempore, the Senate . . . will proceed, by ballot," with a majority required to elect a committee chairman and a plurality required to elect the remaining members.²⁹ But White found himself in a "delicate" position. Although he was a longstanding friend and supporter of the president, he was becoming disillusioned with the administration, and he particularly resented Jackson's designation of Van Buren as his political heir. A firm defender of the Senate's prerogatives, he had refused to let Jackson dictate the composition of a select committee appointed to consider Clay's compromise tariff during the previous Congress, a stand that had deeply offended the president. White would eventually become a Whig, but at the start of the Twenty-third Congress, Clay and the rest of the opposition still regarded him as a Jackson man.³⁰

On December 9, White stated that "he should have announced the standing committees this morning . . . had it not been that a resolution was offered by a Senator [Peleg Sprague] from Maine . . . which proposed to take away from the presiding officer the power of appointing any committees whatsoever." The Senate adopted the resolution the following day, returning to its earlier practice of choosing committees by ballot, with nearly all of the Jacksonians opposing the change.³¹

Van Buren finally arrived in Washington on the evening of December 14 and met with the president and Tennessee Senator Felix Grundy the following morning. He learned that Grundy, painfully aware that his party could no longer count on a majority in the Senate and reluctant to proceed with the selection of committees until Van Buren could provide advice, had offered a motion to postpone the elections until December 16. Webster had voted in favor of that motion, along with five other New England senators—a gesture that Grundy, rightly or wrongly, interpreted as an overture toward the administration. Webster's biographer discounts this possibility but admits that the Massachusetts senator's support for the administration during the nullification battle, and his differences with Clay over the tariff issue, had led to widespread speculation that he intended to form an alliance with the Jacksonians.

During his December 15 meeting with Van Buren, therefore, Grundy raised the possibility of an alliance with Webster, at least for the purposes of electing the Senate's committees. The vice president, however, refused to consider collaboration with Webster, the one individual he genuinely disliked and took pains to avoid. Such an arrangement would blur the very real differences between the administration and the New England opposition, he lectured, and would leave Jackson open to charges that he had placed politics above principle. Persuaded by the force of Van Buren's argument, Grundy deferred to the vice president. The Senate began the balloting to elect chairmen and members of its standing committees on December 16, Van Buren's first day in the chair. With only a slight majority, the Anti-Jackson forces did not win complete control of the committees. Jackson's ally, Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, was reelected chairman of the Military Affairs Committee, and William Wilkins of Pennsylvania was elected chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. But other coveted chairmanships went to opposition senators: the Finance Committee to Webster, the Judiciary Committee to John Clayton of Delaware, and the Committee on Public Lands to one of Jackson's most outspoken critics, George Poindexter of Mississippi.³²

The Senate Censures Jackson: Van Buren Versus Clay

During the four years that Van Buren served as vice president, the president's war on the Bank of the United States was one of the most important and controversial subjects on the Senate's agenda. Anticipating Jackson's order to withdraw the government deposits, bank president Nicholas Biddle had persuaded the bank's directors to order sharp reductions in credit. The directors subsequently decreed that the bank would accept only hard currency from state banks with loans outstanding, a move that forced state banks to adopt similar measures and wreaked havoc in the credit-dependent West and in the nation's financial markets.³³

When Van Buren assumed the chair on December 16, 1833, he found the Senate in a state of turmoil. The Senate's December 11 request that Jackson provide a copy of his withdrawal directive had been met with a curt response that infuriated opposition senators. "I have yet to learn," Jackson had notified the Senate on December 12, "under what constitutional authority that branch of the Legislature has a right to require of me an account of any communication." On December 27, Clay retaliated with two resolutions to censure Jackson, which the Senate adopted after three months of intense and heated debate. Van Buren's legendary poise served him well as Clay and his lieutenants began their attack, dropping not-so-thinly-veiled hints that the vice president was also to blame for the wave of bank and business failures sweeping the nation. Smiling and genial, he took care to maintain order in the chamber, ordering the galleries cleared when necessary. To all outward appearances, he seemed oddly unperturbed at the opprobrium that Clay and his allies heaped on the administration.³⁴

Early in the debate, however, Van Buren had orchestrated a spirited rejoinder to Clay's attacks. Unable to join in the debate himself, he had persuaded Silas Wright, the New York senator widely regarded as his spokesman in the Senate, to deliver the administration's response. Unmoved by Wright's plea that "[t]he administration had several friends in the Senate more competent for the task than myself," Van Buren offered to "reduce all we want to have said to writing." On January 30, Wright presented an impassioned defense of Jackson's conduct and a ringing condemnation of the bank. His lengthy address—the product of Van Buren's pen—emphasized that the question before the public was "Bank or no Bank, . . . not the disposition of the Government deposits." The president, he argued, had been "instrumental in restoring the constitution of the country to what it was intended to be by those who formed it . . . relieving that sacred instrument from those constructive and implied additions under which Congress have claimed the right to place beyond the reach of the people, and without responsibility, a moneyed power." Wright concluded his remarks with an argument that Jackson partisans would use to good advantage in the months that followed. "The country . . . has approved the course of the Executive, in his attempts to relieve us from the corrupt and corrupting power and influence of a national bank," the New York senator stressed, "and it will sustain him in the experiment now making to substitute State institutions for such a fiscal agent."

Notwithstanding Wright's disclaimer that "he had given his opinion as an individual," everyone present realized the truth of Daniel Webster's observation that, knowing the senator's "political connexions, his station, and his relations," it was obvious that he had not "spoken one word which has not been deliberately weighed and considered by others." Van Buren's words, ably articulated by a senator generally regarded as the "clearest logician" of his day, provided a forceful rebuttal to Clay's charges. One senator pronounced the speech "a hit," while Webster fretted about the "effect which the recent debate in the Senate . . . may produce at the north."³⁵ But even this triumph of sorts could not alleviate Van Buren's mounting discomfort as the lengthy debate dragged on. During one particularly heated March session, Clay addressed him directly, pleading with him to tell Jackson "in the language of truth and sincerity, the actual condition of his bleeding

country." Van Buren listened politely as Clay, obviously playing to the galleries, reminded him of his "well-known influence" in the administration. At the conclusion of Clay's remarks, Van Buren handed the gavel to Hugh Lawson White and stepped down from the dais. Clay rose to his feet as the vice president deliberately approached his desk, and the crowds in the galleries fell silent. Then, with a deep bow, and a voice dripping with sarcasm, Van Buren returned fire: "Mr. Senator, allow me to be indebted to you for another pinch of your aromatic Maccoboy." The galleries erupted in a wave of laughter as Clay, speechless and humiliated, gestured helplessly at the snuff on his desk. Van Buren helped himself and returned to the chair, all the while maintaining his studied composure.³⁶

When the Senate finally voted to censure the president on March 28, 1834, Van Buren was not unduly alarmed, convinced that the American people would not take kindly to this dramatic assault on their hero and champion. But he was deeply disturbed by the response that Jackson sent to the Senate in mid-April. The president's critics, and even some of his allies, were shocked to learn that Jackson, as he explained in his infamous "Protest," considered himself the direct representative of the American people—responsible, along with his appointees, for "every species of property belonging to the United States." Worried about the constitutional ramifications of this novel interpretation of presidential power and about the effect that the controversial pronouncement might have on his own prospects in the coming election, Van Buren persuaded Jackson to soften his rhetoric. He was greatly relieved when the 1834 midterm elections affirmed that the American people approved of the war that Jackson waged against the bank on their behalf. Jackson ultimately killed the bank, as he had predicted he would, but the struggle took its toll on Van Buren, who eventually came to regard his duties as president of the opposition-controlled Senate as "so distasteful and so wearing" that, according to a modern biographer, he suffered "more than his share of colds and debilitating upsets."³⁷

The "Weasel"

Other issues before the Senate were equally troublesome for Van Buren, who was well aware that opposition senators, as well as some Jacksonians resentful of his influence, would exploit any apparent failing on his part in the coming election. The abolition movement, which sent scores of antislavery petitions to Congress during the 1830s, posed particular difficulties for a northern politician who had supported emancipation in his own state but was anxious to remain on good terms with southern voters and regarded slavery as a matter best left to the states. Like many northern voters at the time, Van Buren had little use for the abolitionists, dismissing their 1835-1836 crusade for emancipation in the District of Columbia as an attempt to "distract Congress and the country . . . in the midst of a Presidential canvas."

Van Buren's disclaimers failed to satisfy many southerners who considered him an abolitionist at heart, but some were heartened by his June 2, 1836, tie-breaking vote to proceed to the third and final reading of Calhoun's bill authorizing local postal officials to confiscate mailings prohibited by state law. The bill was similar to one that Jackson had proposed after a mass mailing of abolitionist literature to Charleston, South Carolina,

caused a near-riot there the previous summer. But the administration proposal would have authorized the federal government to determine which materials should be embargoed, while Calhoun's would have delegated this function to the states. Calhoun engineered a tied vote on the motion to proceed to the third reading of his bill. If he did so to embarrass Van Buren, as one scholar of the period has suggested, he miscalculated. "The Vice President promptly voted yea, thus preventing Southerners from blaming him when the bill was finally defeated."³⁸ In fact, when the measure came up for the final vote less than a week later,³⁹ the Senate rejected it, a development that Van Buren, a shrewd judge of men and events, may well have anticipated. The "weasel," as Calhoun now disparagingly referred to Van Buren,⁴⁰ had once again outmaneuvered his rival.

A "Third-Rate Man"

On May 20, 1835, the Democratic nominating convention chose Van Buren as the party's 1836 presidential candidate. The unanimous vote of the delegates present belied serious divisions in a party that was, in the words of a contemporary journalist, comprised of "the Jackson party, proper; the Jackson-Van Buren party; the Jackson-anti-Van Buren party." More than a few disaffected Democrats, alarmed at the growth of presidential power during Jackson's two terms and reluctant to countenance more of the same under Van Buren, had grave reservations about the Little Magician. But Jackson had made his preference known. The president was equally adamant that Richard Mentor Johnson, a Kentucky Democrat and military hero who had served in both houses of Congress, should be Van Buren's running mate, a legacy that cost the ticket support among southern voters who regarded Johnson as an "amalgamator" because of his relationship with his slave mistress.

Van Buren was opposed by a field of regional opposition candidates endorsed by state and local Whig organizations. The Whigs, still more a coalition than a party, with no candidate capable of defeating Van Buren outright, hoped that each regional candidate would so weaken the Democratic ticket in his own section that the election would be thrown into the House of Representatives. During the campaign, opposition strategists reviled Van Buren as an abolitionist, a manipulator, and a trimmer—a "third-rate man," in the words of one detractor. David Crockett, formerly a member of the anti-Jackson coalition in the House and one of "Aunt Matty's" sharpest critics, ridiculed the vice president's appearance as he presided over the Senate, "laced up in corsets, such as women in a town wear, and, if possible, tighter than the best of them." Cartoonists portrayed Van Buren clutching the president's coattails, or donning Jackson's too-large greatcoat. More serious detractors warned that Van Buren would continue the aggrandizement of executive power that Jackson had begun. Democrats countered with pointed allusions to the Federalists, who had supported the First Bank of the United States, they reminded voters, as well as such equally repugnant measures as the Alien and Sedition Acts. They coupled these attacks with paeans of praise for the president who had slain the "monster bank."

Van Buren won the election, a triumph that owed more to the fragmented and poorly coordinated campaigns mounted by the opposition and to Jackson's continued popularity

than to his own prestige. He assumed office under a cloud, overshadowed at his presidential inauguration by the crowds that flocked to catch a final glimpse of Old Hickory. He would never be as beloved or as respected as his predecessor. Richard Mentor Johnson had failed to receive an electoral majority after Virginia's electors withheld their votes in protest, forcing the vice-presidential election into the Senate for the first and only time in the nation's history. With his controversial personal history and complete disdain for prevailing norms of social discourse and personal hygiene, Johnson would remain a source of continuing embarrassment for Van Buren.⁴¹

"Martin Van Ruin"

The nation's worsening relations with Mexico posed a serious problem for the new president. American settlers in Texas had declared their independence in 1836, precipitating a war with Mexico, and a request for annexation by the United States was pending at the time of Van Buren's inauguration. Reluctant to involve the nation in a war that northern antislavery interests would inevitably characterize as a war to extend slavery, but equally reluctant to offend southern expansionists, he pursued a dilatory and evasive course until Texas ultimately withdrew its petition.⁴²

Van Buren could not, however, afford to remain equally indecisive with respect to the economic maladies besetting the nation. On the day that he assumed office, one of the nation's most prominent trading houses suspended payments, the first in a wave of brokerage house failures that swept the nation during the panic of 1837. Jackson's "hard money" fiscal policies were only partly to blame for the panic. A trade imbalance and a sharp decline in the price of American cotton had also contributed to the crisis, which was international in scope. But Whigs were quick to blame the nation's economic woes on Jackson and, by extension, on Van Buren, sometimes dubbed "Martin Van Ruin" during this period. He had inherited a situation that one scholar has characterized as a "potentially devastating emergency, probably the worst facing any new President on taking office until James Buchanan had to cope with slavery and the Dred Scott decision in 1837." Van Buren's solution was to "divorce" the government from the banking sector by establishing a treasury independent of the state bank-based system that, contrary to Jackson's expectations, had fuelled the speculative frenzy of the mid 1830s. Whigs succeeded in blocking this initiative until 1840, when Congress finally passed an independent treasury bill. In the meantime, the panic gave way to a depression of unprecedented severity. Up to one third of the factory workers in some northeastern towns were thrown out of work; in the South, vast expanses of once productive farmland went untilled. Prices of food and other necessities skyrocketed, with soup kitchens the only source of sustenance for many destitute residents of Washington, D.C., and other cities.⁴³

Van Buren lost his 1840 bid for reelection to William Henry Harrison, a military hero touted as a "common man" by the Whig strategists who ran an extraordinarily effective campaign on his behalf. After one Democrat made the mistake of dismissing "Old Tippecanoe" as a cider-swilling rustic content to live in a log cabin, Whigs appropriated these symbols to their advantage. The log cabin and the cider barrel were powerful

images during the depression, images that contrasted sharply with the picture that Whigs painted of Van Buren as a nattily attired, high-living schemer, a "used-up man" hopelessly out of touch with the American electorate. Out-maneuvered and out-campaigned, Van Buren's party lost not only the White House, but control of both houses of Congress, as well.⁴⁴

A "Used-Up Man"

Van Buren was staggered by his humiliating defeat. He had received a mere 60 electoral votes, a dismal showing compared with Harrison's 234 electoral votes, and a defeat made even more galling by his failure to carry New York. He gave little outward sign of his disappointment and extended more than the customary courtesies to Harrison when "Old Tip" arrived in Washington shortly before the inauguration. Van Buren was anxious to return to private life, he cheerfully informed friends, and seemed to enjoy the rousing welcome that awaited him New York City. (He had, of course, conveniently informed friends that he would arrive in the city on March 23, allowing them plenty of time to prepare a "surprise" in his honor.) But he was deeply shaken at the outcome of the election, and would have announced his retirement from politics had Silas Wright not intervened with a timely lecture about his responsibilities to the Democratic party.⁴⁵

Van Buren retired to Lindenwald, his Kinderhook estate, cautiously pondering his prospects for 1844 while maintaining that "his ambition had been fully satisfied." But he made an extensive tour of the southern and western states in the spring and summer of 1842, drawing large crowds wherever he went. The voters who had turned him out of office were amazed to discover that the man demonized by Whigs as an insensitive dandy and a shrewd, cunning schemer was merely a plain-spoken, unassuming, and quite ordinary man. "Instead of a dwarf Dutchman, a little dandy who you might lift in a bandbox," Jackson observed, "the people found him a plain man of middle size, plain and affable." Cautiously and discreetly, Van Buren began laying the groundwork for another attempt at the presidency. The leading contender after the first ballot at the 1844 Democratic convention, he ultimately lost the nomination to James K. Polk, a darkhorse candidate who supported the immediate annexation of Texas. Resolved never again to seek elective office, he focused his energies on securing New York for Polk.⁴⁶

After Polk's inauguration, Van Buren watched with mounting alarm as disagreement over the extension of slavery into the territory acquired from Mexico began to split his increasingly fragile party. He was deeply troubled by southern Democrats' claims that Congress could not bar slavery from the new territories; he had always believed that the institution, where it already existed, was a matter best left to the individual states. But when events in Texas offered southern slaveholders the opportunity to extend their reach toward the Southwest, Van Buren decided that he could not support the expansion of a practice that he regarded as evil. In 1848, the Free Soil party—a coalition of antislavery Democrats, antislavery Whigs and disaffected Whigs—nominated Van Buren as their presidential candidate. In this last attempt at elective office, he lost to Whig candidate

Zachary Taylor, having received a mere 10 percent of the popular vote and no electoral votes.⁴⁷

Van Buren died at Lindenwald on July 24, 1862. He had lived long enough to see the southern states secede from the Union, a bitter disappointment for the man who had forged a once-formidable coalition that had transcended sectional lines. His last public statement, made the year before his death, was a declaration of his "earnest and vigorous support to the Lincoln Administration for . . . the maintenance of the Union and the Constitution" in response to President Lincoln's call for troops to suppress the rebellion. Lincoln reciprocated with a stilted posthumous tribute: "The grief of his patriotic friends, will measurably be assuaged by the consciousness that while . . . seeing his end approaching, his prayers were for the restoration of the authority of the government of which he had been head, and for peace and good will among his fellow citizens."⁴⁸

Notes:

1. Donald B. Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Politics System* (Princeton, NJ, 1984), p. 188.
2. John Niven, *Martin Van Buren: The Romantic Age of American Politics* (New York, 1983), p. 298.
3. James A. Hamilton, *reminiscences of James A. Hamilton; or, Men and Events, at Home and Abroad, During Three Quarters of a Century* (New York, 1869), pp. 42, 97; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945), pp. 47-50; Robert V. Remini, *Martin Van Buren and the Making of the Democratic Party* (New York, 1959; reprint of 1951 edition), pp. 2-3; Niven, pp. 7-8.
4. Schlesinger, p. 49; Carl Sifakis, *The Dictionary of Historic Nicknames* (New York, 1984), p. 508.
5. Also spelled Hoes.
6. Niven, pp. 1-22; John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren* (New York, 1973; reprint of 1920 edition), 1:9-10.
7. Niven, pp. 23-25, 60, 72, 162-63. Four of the five sons born to Martin and Hannah Van Buren survived infancy.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-52.
9. Remini, *Martin Van Buren*, pp. 5-11; Niven, p. 88.
10. Niven, pp. 102-17.
11. Remini, *Martin Van Buren*, pp. 36-92. For more on the 1824 election, see also Chapter 7, "John C. Calhoun," pp. 8-10.
12. Remini, *Martin Van Buren*, pp. 91-113. For more about the Panama mission, see Chapter 7 of this volume, "John C. Calhoun," pp. 12-13.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 120-32; Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832*
14. Remini, *Martin Van Buren*, pp. 192-93; Remini, *Jackson and the Course of American Freedom*, pp. 116-42.
15. Remini, *Martin Van Buren*, pp. 170-85. See also Chapter 7, "John C. Calhoun," p. 22.
16. Fitzpatrick, ed., 1:220-24.
17. Remini, *Jackson and the Course of American Freedom*, pp. 159-66.
18. This incident is also discussed in Chapter 7, "John C. Calhoun," pp. 26-27.
19. Niven, pp. 232-71; Remini, *Jackson and the Course of American Freedom*, pp. 291-320.
20. Niven, pp. 272-95; Remini, *Jackson and the Course of American Freedom*, pp. 345-55.
21. Niven, pp. 295-98.
22. Remini, *Jackson and the Course of American Freedom*, pp. 355-58; Niven, pp. 298-301.
23. Niven, pp. 301-29. For a more detailed account of the nullification crisis, see Chapter 7 of this volume, "John C. Calhoun," pp. 23-25.
24. Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy, 1833-1845*, (New York, 1984), pp. 374-92; Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Bank War: A Study in the Growth of Presidential Power* (New York, 1967), pp. 1-108.
25. Remini, *Jackson and the Course of American Democracy*, p. 46.

26. Remini, *Jackson and the Bank War*, *passim*; Niven, pp. 304, 330-47.
27. Niven, pp. 368-72, 402; Remini, *Jackson and the Course of American Democracy*, pp. 201-18.
28. At the beginning of the Twenty-second Congress, 20 of the Senate's 48 members belonged to the Jackson coalition; of the remainder, 26 belonged to the Anti-Jackson party and 2 were Nullifiers. U.S., Congress, Senate, *The Senate, 1789-1989*, by Robert C. Byrd, S. Doc., 100-20, 100th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 4, *Historical Statistics, 1789-1992*, 1993, p. 416.
29. U.S., Congress, Senate, *Journal*, 20th Cong., 2d sess., p. 51.
30. Nancy N. Scott, ed., *A Memoir of Hugh Lawson White, Judge of the Supreme Court of Tennessee, Member of the Senate of the United States . . . With Selections from His Speeches and Correspondence* (Philadelphia, 1856), pp. 265-300; Remini, *Jackson and the Course of the American Democracy*, p. 39; Niven, p. 356.
31. U.S., Congress, Senate, *Register of Debates in Congress*, 23rd Cong., 1st sess., pp. 19-29; *Senate Journal* 23d Cong., 1st sess., p. 39.
32. Niven, pp. 356-58; Remini, *Jackson and the Course of American Democracy*, pp. 116-18; *Register of Debates in Congress*, 23d Cong., 1st sess., pp. 39-44; *Senate Journal*, 23d Cong., 1st sess., pp. 39-43; Maurice G. Baxter, *One and Inseparable: Daniel Webster and the Union* (Cambridge, 1984), 224-28.
33. Niven pp. 333-54; Remini, *Jackson and the Bank War*, pp. 109-53.
34. U.S., Congress, Senate, *The Senate, 1789-1989: Addresses on the History of the United States Senate*, by Robert C. Byrd, S. Doc. 100-20, 100th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 1, 1989, pp. 127-32; Niven, p. 354.
35. John A. Garraty, *Silas Wright* (New York, 1970; reprint of 1949 edition), pp. 114-18; *Register of Debates in Congress*, 23d Cong., 1st sess., pp. 397-405.
36. Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York, 1991), pp. 452-53; Niven, pp. 354-55.
37. Byrd, *The Senate*, 1:127-41, 145-47; Niven, pp. 365-66; Remini, *Jackson and the Course of American Democracy*, pp. 150-60; Remini, *Jackson and the Bank War*, pp. 152-53.
38. Niven, pp. 384-85, 390; Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *The Jacksonian Era* (New York, 1959), p. 107-9; Cole, pp. 269-72; *Senate Journal*, 24th Cong., 1st sess., pp. 396-400.
39. Donald B. Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Politics System* (Princeton, NJ, 1984), p. 188.
40. Cole, p. 264.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 256-90; Niven, pp. 386-402. For a more detailed account of the 1836 election, see Chapter 9, "Richard Mentor Johnson," pp. 412-61.
42. Cole, pp. 317-21.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 285-360; Sifakis, p. 508; Niven, pp. 412-61.
44. Cole, pp. 368-73.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 372-75; Niven, pp. 471-83.
46. Niven, pp. 484-548.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 542-90; Cole, pp. 407-18.
48. Cole, pp. 317-21.