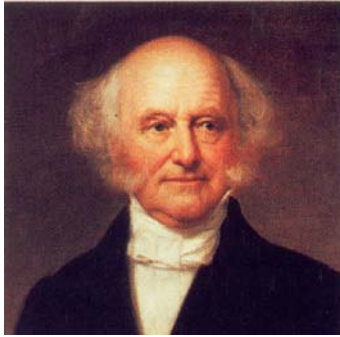


Martin Van Buren

The 8th President of the United States



Martin Van Buren was a well mannered man who listened to others rather than talk about his views on politics. He rarely let his feelings show in public. He was the first president born a true American citizen. All of the previous presidents were born before 1776; therefore they were born British subjects. He was born in Kinderhook which is upstate New York, making him **the first president from New York.**

Van Buren began his political career when he was **18** years old. He joined the campaign to elect Thomas Jefferson and his passion for a political career led him to be a delegate for the Republican caucus.

1812-1820 He was the New York State Senator. He was a Democratic-Republican who for the War of 1812. His main campaign for Senator was based on no jail for debtors. He believed that the poor people put in jail for falling into debt and not repaying their monies due should not be sent to jail just for being poor and unable to repay.

1821-1828 He was a U.S. Senator for New York State. He strongly opposed the role of the Supreme Court and the issue of Judicial Review. He also opposed the “Nationalism” campaign of President John Quincy Adams; he was a strong advocate of States Rights. In his last years as Senator, he campaigned on behalf of Andrew Jackson, believing that he was the only candidate that could unite the nation based on Jeffersonian Principles.

1829 He became Governor of New York but only held this position from January to March of that year. He resigned to become Secretary of State for Andrew Jackson, partially because of his political beliefs and partially because of Jackson’s “Spoils System”.

1829-1831 As Secretary of State he was the only cabinet member to honor Jackson’s request regarding the treatment of Peggy Eaton. This created a personal friendship with Jackson, to the point that Van Buren became one of Jackson’s Kitchen Cabinet.

1833-1837 He was elected as Jackson’s Vice President and his role, approved by Jackson, made him the person Jackson wanted for President once his terms were over.

In **1836** he became the Democratic candidate for President. His opponents were the Whigs who campaigned strongly against “King Andrew I”.



The Whig Party were disorganized for the election, they had three candidates who were sectionalists and had no unity.

William Henry Harrison	(Ohio) representing the West
Daniel Webster	(Massachusetts) representing the North East
Hugh Lawson White	(Tennessee) representing the South

Part of Van Buren’s campaign was the issue of slavery. Ironically, even though he was from the North, he did not want Congress to abolish slavery even though he knew they legally could. This gave him strong support from the Southern states and he consequently swept the election, The nomination for his Vice-President however was not so easy. The Virginia electors, while supporting Van Buren, refused to vote for his running mate, Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky. Johnson had a strong military career. (Even though badly wounded, it was Johnson who claimed that he was the person who killed Tecumseh).

Instead of Johnson, the Senate voted for William Smith of Alabama. This change deprived Johnson as a majority winner and this meant that the race for Vice-President had to be decided in the Senate. In February 1837, the Senate finally elected Johnson Vice-President.

The Panic of 1837 was the first political challenge faced by Van Buren as President. At first the New York banks and then other banks across the country suspended converting paper money into gold and silver. This led to a panic of people demanding to withdraw their funds from the banks. What followed was an economic depression that lasted until 1843. In all, 900 banks were forced to permanently close and the unemployed rioted in every city due to the lack of food. It was such a severe depression that for the first time, the United States had an unfavorable balance of trade with England. (The Panic of 1837 would cost Van Buren his re-election in 1840).

Martin Van Buren also faced several major international problems that would create unrest within the nation.

The Caroline Affair – 1837. In Ontario, Canada there was a revolution against British rule, led by William L. Mackenzie. The British ordered the Canadian militia to confront the rebels. They were subsequently pushed back to an island in the Niagara River. Sympathetic Americans supplied the rebels by ship, the *Caroline*. Britain, upon hearing of this American intervention, told the Canadian militia to seize the ship. They quickly captured the American ship, set it on fire and then sailed it over Niagara Falls, killing one American and injuring several more. Van Buren was forced to send federal troops to the area, even though he did not want a war against Britain. He stopped any American reprisals by issuing a **Proclamation of Neutrality**.

The Aroostook War – 1839. This was a boundary dispute between Maine and New Brunswick, Canada. The boundary between these two areas was 12,000 square miles along the Aroostook River. Both sides claimed that the river was theirs. Both sides massed on the border. To prevent another war, Van Buren sent General Winfield Scott to arrange a truce. This stand-down would later be part of the **Webster-Ashburton Treaty** in 1842.

The *La Amistad* incident was an international issue that was to emerge during his presidency. Under the advice of his Congress, he was changed the judge half-way through the trial. He nominated a judge that was younger and more towards appeasement for the Spanish. This ploy backfired on Van Buren when the judge sided with the African slaves and set them free. It caused an embarrassment to Van Buren with the Spanish royal family.

Van Buren did fight a major war during his term. **The Second Seminole War** was a continuation of Andrew Jackson's first war. Van Buren's army defeated the last Seminole resistance groups in 1842.

The issue of the **annexation of Texas** was a major issue for Van Buren. He was opposed to Texas joining the Union. He believed that it would create another round of disputes in Congress between the North and South. He vetoed any requests made by Texas to become part of the United States. (Texas was finally admitted in 1845)

In 1844, Martin Van Buren was beaten in the presidential election by **James K. Polk** due to the past financial crisis and the Texas annexation issue. He was offered the position of Ambassador to England by Polk but graciously declined stating that he wanted to move back to New York state. It was during this time that Van Buren became more active on the anti-slavery issue.

His last political actions came in 1848 when he was nominated as Presidential candidate for the **Free Soil Party**. He did not carry any state during the election but his Free Soil Party did take valuable votes away from the Democrat Lewis Cass, allowing the Whig Party nomination, **Zachary Taylor**, the victory.

After the election Van Buren officially retired from politics. Before his death at home, he toured Europe meeting with Queen Victoria of England and Pope Pius IX in Rome.