

# Martin van Buren an underrated president history essay



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Martin Van Buren became the eighth President of the United States at the age of 54, serving one term from 1837 to 1841. The objective of this paper is to determine if Van Buren was a relatively obscure President, undeserving of much acclaim, or was his role in our country's history deserved of much more recognition than historians and the general public have given him credit for? In order to answer the question, this paper will review narratives of his qualifications, domestic policy, foreign policy, leadership and organizational skills, and his ability to manage crises, and analyze some of his controversial decisions. Despite numerous setbacks and obstacles encountered during Van Buren's Presidency, this paper will offer a rebuttal to the claim that his presidency was unsuccessful. After a careful examination of his presidential record and policies, and taking into consideration the economic turmoil which he inherited during his presidency, I will prove that Martin Van Buren indeed deserves a more revered place in history than he has received.

Van Buren was born in 1782 in the small upstate New York community of Kinderhook, near the Hudson River. Martin was the middle child of nine children and the modest family lived in a house attached to a tavern, where his father worked. The family was of Dutch ancestry and Martin learned to speak Dutch before he learned English. At the age of 12 he began an apprenticeship as a law clerk. He gained admittance to the New York State Bar in 1803, at the age of 21, without receiving a formal higher education. Van Buren established a successful legal practice and soon set his sights on the world of politics. In 1809, he became a Judge in Columbia County, New York, serving in that position until 1813, when he ran for the New York State

Senate and won. He served in this office until 1820. While he served in the New York State Senate he also served as New York's Attorney General. In 1819 he served as a delegate to the New York State Constitutional Convention, was elected to the U. S. Senate, and reelected in 1827. In 1828 he resigned from the U. S. Senate because he had been elected Governor of New York State. The following year, in 1829, President Andrew Jackson appointed Van Buren to a Cabinet position, Secretary of State. He served as Secretary of State until 1831. In 1832 Van Buren briefly served overseas as Ambassador to England but his nomination for the ambassadorship was rejected by the U. S. Senate and he returned to the U. S. President Andrew Jackson asked him to serve on his presidential ticket in 1832 as Vice President. Jackson won the election and Van Buren served as Vice President from 1833 to 1837.

Van Buren was a brilliant strategist, possessing very strong organizational skills. He is credited with founding and developing many of the common political practices we know of today. Van Buren's accomplishments include founding the two-party system in U. S. politics, organizing the Democratic Party, and creating the party caucus, nominating convention and patronage system. Van Buren was very successful in these areas, and through experience and observation, understood that politics very much involved being decisive and also compromising. He learned the art of the political process and mastered areas such as deal making, promotion, publicity, party activism and knowing when to cut losses. Because of his prowess and his skill at attaining his political goals, he was nicknamed the " Little Magician." Van Buren was influential in building a new Democratic Party that revitalized

Jefferson's union of the southern planters and the Republicans from the north, who now rallied cohesively behind Andrew Jackson.

In 1836 Van Buren won the unanimous support of the Democratic Party Convention and became the presidential candidate, which he went on to win quite easily. His campaign was based on continuing the policies of Jackson and the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson that resonated within him. Van Buren believed wholeheartedly in the Jeffersonian principles of a limited national government and the liberty and sovereignty of the people and the states. Van Buren had created the modern political party by financing it with government offices and legislative favors. He then extended his frugal small government philosophy to the national level and embraced Adam Smith's economic philosophy. He strongly opposed federally financed internal improvements and public assistance to social groups. Van Buren had a tough act to follow into the White House, as he succeeded the popular and charismatic Andrew Jackson. Van Buren's strengths and attributes were quite different from those of President Jackson. He was not an inspirational person, an especially gifted orator or a leader of men in battle. He was only 5' 6" tall and was dwarfed in physical stature by the war hero, Andrew Jackson. Van Buren was revered for his effectiveness behind the scenes, rather than out in front of the public. By the time he had been elected president, Van Buren had been in Washington for more than 15 years and was very comfortable with his surroundings and was at the top of his political form.

According to Silbey, Van Buren viewed the American economy at the time as prosperous and imagined that his role in office would be to keep the nation on an even keel and firm in its present pathway. He was determined to be a <https://assignbuster.com/martin-van-buren-an-underrated-president-history-essay/>

devoted Jacksonian in office, dedicated to preserving and defending Old Hickory's policies and approach to governing America, as exemplars of the Jeffersonian commitment that was central to both of them (Sibley, 2005, 110). However, Van Buren was soon to face many difficult challenges and divisive issues which would test his Presidency. He was faced with the "Panic of 1837," the worst depression the nation had faced at that time, an embezzlement scandal, the proposed annexation of Texas, divisive slavery issues, Indian problems, and foreign policy tensions between the United States and Great Britain over the Canadian border. Van Buren faced more crises in a short period of time than any of his predecessors had experienced during their presidencies.

Van Buren took office as the booming U. S. economy of the early and mid-1830s began to slow down. The "Panic of 1837" was the prelude to the worst depression yet faced by the United States. These economic troubles immediately became President Van Buren's primary concern.

The government had been selling western lands to the public and the banks had been accepting state bank notes which had questionable value. The Jackson Democrats had felt that the banks were fueling inflation by funding the speculation with paper money not backed by bullion reserves. The Specie Circular was an executive order issued by President Andrew Jackson in 1836. It required the payment for government land to be made in gold or silver coinage. Due to this act, banks located in the east were transferring large amounts of gold and silver to banks in the west to handle the demand of land purchases in the western expansion. Because of these large

transfers, eastern banks experienced capital shortages which affected their  
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ability to provide loans. As the economy began to decline from the lack of capital, depositors withdrew their money causing many banks to fail. Another factor contributing to the panic was that Jackson also decided not to renew the charter of the Second Bank of the United States, a federal bank that acted as the treasury for the government. This forced the withdrawal of government funds from the Second Bank to be transferred to an assortment of state banks, leaving the United States without a solid financial infrastructure in place.

At the time economics was really an unknown discipline and the government did not have precedents and the experience to deal with a depression of this magnitude. The federal government's revenues were entirely dependent upon the sale of public lands and the collection of tariffs. There was no federal income tax at this point in time. Unemployment became a major problem and many farms and businesses were forced into bankruptcy. Van Buren received a majority of the blame, even though the previous administration's policies were primarily responsible for the depression. Van Buren was proactive in trying to help the economy. He was able to persuade Congress to enact tax relief in the form of a six-month moratorium on the payment of customhouse bonds. He also was able to get Congress to agree to halt the distribution of federal money to the state governments, as federal governments surpluses were depleting rapidly. In addition to ending the distributions to the states, Van Buren was able to persuade Congress to finance the national debt with short-term Treasury notes rather than long-term loans. Van Buren strongly recommended an independent treasury and sub-treasury system to Congress. He was able to articulate his beliefs that

the root cause of the financial failures were primarily caused by the policies of the state banks and foreign investors. Van Buren sought to keep government funds out of banks entirely and presented an Independent Treasury plan to keep public funds in government vaults and conduct public business in gold or silver coin. He was able to sway Congress to adopt these measures as he believed it would protect the United States from further speculation frenzies. The opposing Whig party dug in and obstructed Van Buren until 1840, but after a long and hard fought process, the Independent Treasury was eventually passed by Congress and was signed into law in July of 1840. Van Buren also issued an executive order, which reduced working hours, mandating a ten-hour work day on all federal public works. According to Schlesinger, this measure was an unmistakable declaration that the people's government would act on behalf of the people as freely as in the past when the capitalists' government had acted on behalf of the capitalists (Schlesinger, 1953, 265). The combination of these decisive efforts helped to bring the country out of the depression and to improve the financial infrastructure of the nation, albeit late in his presidential term. Van Buren was a man of principles and he stayed loyal to his beliefs by not using the economic depression as an excuse or opportunity to expand the government's role. According to Sloan, Van Buren voiced his beliefs clearly in a plea for the Independent Treasury in his Third Annual Message, December 2, 1839. He stated, " Relief can not be found in expedients. Indebtness can not be lessened by borrowing more money or by changing the form of the debt. The balance of trade is not to be turned in our favor by creating new demands upon us abroad. Our currency can not be improved by the creation of new banks or more issues from those which now exist. Although these

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devices sometimes appear to give temporary relief, they almost invariably aggravate the evil in the end. It is only by retrenchment and reform, by curtailing public and private expenditures, by paying our debts, and by reforming our banking system that we are to expect effectual relief, security for the future, and an enduring prosperity (Sloan, 1969, 93)."

The collection of customs tariffs in New York was one of the largest sources of income for the United States federal government at the time. The country was shocked to learn that Samuel Swartwout, the Collector of Customs for New York, had embezzled \$1.22 million and fled the United States to Europe in 1838. This was an incredibly large amount of money at that time and was damaging to the economy and the credibility of the government. Van Buren's administration received the criticism and blame, even though the embezzlement had occurred over the past eight years. Swartwout had been appointed to this position of power by President Jackson in 1829, over the strong objections of Van Buren. According to Wilson, Van Buren had vehemently fought the appointment of Swartwout and the appointment almost resulted in Van Buren resigning from the cabinet. Van Buren used the scandal to strengthen his argument that an Independent Treasury was needed in order to handle its own funds and keep the people's money out of private corporations (Wilson, 1984, 126).

Van Buren had complex challenges in the foreign policy area that could have made great differences in the course of history of the nation. While presidents are typically revered for their leadership and strength during victorious wars, there should be some acclaim and recognition reserved for those presidents who have kept our nation and its citizenry out of war. Van  
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Buren was committed to peace and maintaining neutrality and demonstrated moral courage in his efforts to avoid war, even going against many in his own party. He was successful in keeping the United States out of two wars during his term, one with Mexico and one with Great Britain. While serving as Vice-President, he was able to utilize his patience and political skill to help restrain Jackson's hot temper and to avoid a confrontation with France.

American settlers located in Texas, a Mexican province at the time, declared independence in 1836 and led a successful revolt. This posed problems because Mexico refused to recognize Texas as a new nation, and the Texas constitution sanctioned slavery. If the United States annexed Texas this posed the very real threat of a war with Mexico and domestic political controversy between the northern and southern states over the slavery issue. Abolitionists were already petitioning Congress and spreading antislavery propaganda throughout the country, which was increasing tensions and causing rioting. But Van Buren was not eager for war and desired friendly relations with all foreign powers. He was able to persuade southerners to be patient in the process of admitting Texas into the Union, so that a war with Mexico could be avoided. Van Buren believed that this territorial expansion would divide democratic ranks and cause a sectional struggle that could lead to dissolution of the Union. According to Curtis, the annexation of Texas may have made the South feel more secure, but Van Buren thought that the risks outweighed the rewards. He had helped found the party on a North-South axis, and he refused to abandon either pole to gratify the desires of the other. He hoped to avoid a destructive sectional debate (Curtis, 1970, 169). Van Buren formally rejected the offer of

annexation on August 25, 1837. He instead used diplomatic skill to get the Mexican government to accept arbitration of US claims by a third party independent commission.

At the same time, on its northern border, an anti-British rebellion in Canada and a volatile boundary dispute in Maine raised the outlook of a new war with Great Britain. In November 1837, British subjects in Lower Canada and Quebec rebelled against the British. Hundreds of American citizens in New York signed up to help support the uprising. Many joined due to the cash incentives offered by the rebels. By December over 1, 000 American recruits were camped on Navy Island in the Niagara River. In order to hinder any invasion plans by the recruits, British forces crossed over to the American side of the river, where they sank a ferryboat being utilized to transport recruits.

Van Buren realized that British financial resources were crucial to the American economy and did not want to incur a military conflict with Great Britain. He sent General Winfield Scott to Buffalo in order to convince the American Patriots to disband. Van Buren also warned the patriots that no aid or support would be given to Americans who crossed the border to fight and persuaded Congress to enact a tough neutrality act. The president also responded by sending the militias from New York and Vermont to enforce the proclamation. Not long after one crisis had been averted, another dangerous event occurred. Since 1783, the boundary between Maine and New Brunswick had placed miles of territory in dispute. In 1838, Canadian lumberjacks had set up timber operations along the Aroostook River, in the disputed region. The Maine legislature issued an order for the Canadians to <https://assignbuster.com/martin-van-buren-an-underrated-president-history-essay/>

leave but they refused. The Maine militia was dispatched to the river and faced New Brunswick troops in a confrontation which became known as the Aroostook War. Van Buren understood that any diplomatic misstep could raise tensions in either country and could incur bloodshed. The president supported Maine's claim but he couldn't let the state draw the federal government into a war. Congress caught up in the fervor, went into action and authorized 50, 000 volunteers and earmarked \$10 million for war. Van Buren called on General Scott again and sent him to the disputed region. Van Buren and Scott were able to successfully negotiate a truce, and both sides withdrew their militia forces. According to Sibley, the border dispute between the United States and Canada quieted down, although a number of incidents continued to occur there until the end of the administration. However, it created a great deal of frustration and anger among many of the Americans living along the border. All of it provided much raw material for a subsequent political backlash against the President and his party (Sibley, 2005, 127).

Van Buren was resolute in his desire to avoid war. He realized that the American military forces were not prepared for war. The navy's fleet was old and the standing army only had 8, 000 men of which many were poorly equipped. A majority of the army had been deployed to Florida on a mission to force the Seminole Indians and their African-American allies, many of them fugitive slaves, to resettle in Indian Territory, west of the Mississippi River. Van Buren was determined to carry out Andrew Jackson's policy of Indian removal, even though the removal was tragic and devastated the Indian people. The cost of the Indian removal was in the range of \$50 million during Van Buren's presidency, but it did provide an economic stimulus to

the ailing economy. By the mid-point of 1838, the financial crisis had largely subsided and a majority of the banks resumed specie payments.

President Van Buren was determined to keep the United States out of war and he maintained his principles of peace at a great political cost. In his re-election bid in 1840 he was to lose his beloved state of New York and the state of Maine to the Whig party, the first time the Whigs ever carried Maine in a presidential election. In 1840 the Whigs falsely portrayed Van Buren's opponent, General William Henry Harrison, as a simple farmer living in a log cabin, while portraying Van Buren as an elitist. This campaign depiction resonated with voters. It is interesting to note that Van Buren's upbringing was actually much more modest than Harrison's. Campaign rhetoric also labeled Van Buren with an unflattering nickname that stuck, "Martin Van Ruin." However, in the end, Van Buren's election defeat was more the result of the economic hardships of the depression than the propaganda of the Whigs.

Van Buren refused to put political ambitions above the country, even when some of his closest political advisers had urged him to start a foreign war as a way to divert the public's attention from the domestic economic difficulties. While he was successful in avoiding foreign wars, he did much more than just maintain the status quo on the domestic front. He stayed loyal to his Jeffersonian principles and his Adam Smith economic beliefs. He was able to reduce the power and the reach of central authority against strong opposition and helped guide the United States economy through one of its most severe depressions. Van Buren's principled course which he had charted left an enduring legacy. Van Buren's Democratic Party remained the

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political alliance that promoted personal liberty, laissez-faire, and free trade, allowing Americans greater freedom from government intervention than any other people. According to Remini, Van Buren had no conception of the long-range results his work would have upon the nation. He had acted instinctively, master politician that he was. He never fully realized that from these simple beginnings a great party of the people had emerged, cutting across all sections and classes of the country and holding the Union together (Remini, 1970, 197).

Van Buren was an accomplished politician with a statesmanlike vision of the dangers the nation faced. His skill, patience and well planned responses helped the country face these serious challenges at this most difficult time in our history. Van Buren's record as a statesman is an impressive one, especially when considering the number of difficulties he encountered in so short a period of time. The Panic of 1837 demanded his full attention but he was still able to act swiftly and surely during the times of international crises. For these cool headed efforts, tireless service and accomplishments, Martin Van Buren truly deserves more credit and a more revered place in history than he has received.