

Chapter 111 -- Overview Of Van Buren's Term



Dates:
March 4, 1837-March 4, 1841

Sections:

- Van Buren Addresses Slavery In His Inaugural Speech
- Van Buren's Term In Office

Time: March 4, 1837

Van Buren Addresses Slavery In His Inaugural Speech



While Van Buren's inaugural speech is long and tedious, it is remembered for one startling moment when he openly names and addresses the highly charged topic of "domestic slavery."

In doing so, he acknowledges that future political debate in America will be played out within a sectional frame-work, with the South intent on protecting and expanding slavery and the North seeking to contain it.

He begins by referring to slavery as a "prominent source of discord" and one which the founders treated with "delicacy and forbearance."

In justly balancing the powers of the Federal and State authorities, difficulties...arose at the outset, and subsequent collisions were deemed inevitable. Amid these it was scarcely believed possible that a scheme of government so complex in construction could remain uninjured.

Martin Van Buren (1782-1862)

The last, perhaps the greatest, of the prominent sources of discord and disaster supposed to lurk in our political condition was the institution of domestic slavery. Our forefathers were deeply impressed with the delicacy of this subject, and they treated it with forbearance so evidently wise that in spite of every sinister foreboding it never until the present period disturbed the tranquility of our common country.

But he now feels that the current “violence of excited passions” evident in congress – presumably the angry floor debates on abolishing slavery in the federal District of Columbia -- must now be addressed.

Recent events (have) made it obvious... that the least deviation from this spirit of forbearance is injurious to every interest, that of humanity included. Amidst the violence of excited passions this generous and fraternal feeling has been sometimes disregarded; and I can not refrain from anxiously invoking my fellow-citizens never to be deaf to its dictates.

Perceiving before my election the deep interest this subject was beginning to excite, I believed it a solemn duty fully to make known my sentiments in regard to it, and now, when every motive for misrepresentation has passed away, I trust that they will be candidly weighed and understood.

At this point, Van Buren announces his stand on slavery.

He calls himself an “uncompromising opponent of every effort to abolish slavery in DC” and one who is decided to “resist the slightest interference with it in the states where it exists.”

All of this of course is music to the ears of his Southern constituency.

I must go into the Presidential chair the inflexible and uncompromising opponent of every attempt on the part of Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia against the wishes of the slaveholding States, and also with a determination equally decided to resist the slightest interference with it in the States where it exists."

The (election) result authorizes me to believe that (this view) has been approved by a majority of the people of the United States, including those whom they most immediately affect. It now only remains to add that no bill conflicting with these views can ever receive my constitutional sanction. These opinions have been adopted in the firm belief that they are in accordance with the spirit that actuated the venerated fathers of the Republic, and that succeeding experience has proved them to be humane, patriotic, expedient, honorable, and just.

From there he expresses his confidence that the recent agitation around slavery has failed to threaten “the stability our institutions” or of the Government itself.

If the agitation of this subject was intended to reach the stability of our institutions, enough has occurred to show that it has signally failed, and that in this as in every other instance the apprehensions of the timid and the hopes of the wicked for the destruction of our Government are again destined to be disappointed.

After all, he says, slavery is simply one more obstacle in the many America has overcome on the road to a prosperity secured by the Constitution.

We look back on obstacles avoided and dangers overcome, on expectations more than realized and prosperity perfectly secured.

But has prosperity been perfectly secured?

Within thirteen days of Van Buren’s optimistic address, a New York financier named Philip Hone writes, “The great (financial) crisis is near at hand, if it has not already arrived.”

Much to the new President's chagrin, an economic depression is about to smother his high hopes for a successful administration.

Time: March 4, 1837 – March 4, 1841

Van Buren's Term In Office

Martin Van Buren surely lives up to his nickname as the "Little Magician" when it comes to maneuvering his way into the White House – but his stay there will prove anything but magical from start to finish.

Jackson's "Specie Circular" order, which Van Buren supports, sets off a financial crisis that sweeps across the country and turns the population against the President and the party he has so carefully crafted. A special session of congress – the first ever assembled for a non-military threat – meets in September 1837, but fails to arrive at a solution to stabilize the currency and restore access to bank loans, the necessary fuel of capitalism. Once again the proper balance between wild speculation and prudent investment is elusive in an increasingly complex American economy.

On top of the banking woes, the public conscience is soon shocked by the murder of an abolitionist newspaperman, Elijah Lovejoy, by a white mob in Alton, Illinois, in November 1837. This event galvanizes anti-slavery advocates across the North, and, in hindsight, makes Lovejoy "the first casualty of the civil war" to follow.

Two men in particular regard Lovejoy's murder as a call to action. One is John Brown, owner of a struggling tannery business in Ohio and future abolitionist martyr – the other is Abraham Lincoln, a 28 year old lawyer in southern Illinois, distressed by the breakdown he sees in law and order.

Lovejoy's death, and the lack of any punishment for his killers, also prompts a renewed flood of Anti-Slavery Society petitions to congress, which JQ Adams reads in defiance of the "Gag Order" of 1836. Southern politicians rally against Adams and behind John C. Calhoun's assertion that "slavery is a positive good" and in need of a fresh bill in congress affirming its legal legitimacy for all times.

The growing hostility on the floor turns again into open violence when the Kentucky Whig, William Graves, challenges and kills John Cilley, a Maine Democrat, in a duel over an alleged slight of honor.

To deal with the economic meltdown, Van Buren makes repeated attempts to create a new financial institution called an "Independent Treasury," to manage federal funds and stabilize the value of the dollar. He argues that this "US Treasury" would eliminate the conflicts of interest inherent in privately held bank corporations, and would print and circulate a new supply of "properly backed" paper money to jumpstart the loan-making process. The Senate backs this initiative, but the House tables it until June 1840, fearing the move would place too much power in the hands of a President.

Conflict and frustrations bleed into Van Buren's final years in the White House.

A Spanish slave ship, the *Amistad*, lands in a Connecticut port in August of 1839, filled with blacks who have killed the white crew to secure their freedom. Over the next eighteen months battles will be fought out in newspapers and in the courts about whether to return the prisoners to Spain as "slave property" or grant them liberty. Once again, JQ Adams is in the middle of the dispute, finally arguing for, and winning, their freedom before the Supreme Court.

Van Buren's final burden centers on what to do about the Republic of Texas. Despite his fervent wish to expand to the west, Andrew Jackson has walked away from annexation in 1836 for fear of war with Mexico and the prospect of a congressional battle over admitting Texas as another slave state. But the matter doesn't die there. The Texans again seek annexation; the South supports it; and so does Jackson, now from the safety of his retirement at the Hermitage.

Pressure mounts when both France and Britain recognize Texas as an independent nation, hardly the outcome favored by the public. Still Van Buren comes down on the side of restraint, resisting annexation for the same reasons Jackson had four years earlier.

Key Events: Martin Van Buren's Term

1837	
February 6	(Pre-inauguration) Calhoun delivers his "slavery is a positive good" speech in congress
March 4	Jackson and Johnson are inaugurated
April	Uncertainty grows about the value of the dollar and access to loans across the country
May 10	Banks in New York stop redeeming dollars for gold/silver and other cities follow them
August 4	Texas petitions to be annexed by the US and be admitted as a state
August 31	RW Emerson's PBK speech "The American Scholar" proclaims US intellectual honors
September 5	Special Session of Congress discusses "Specie Circular" policy and bank failures
September 14	Bill to create an "Independent Treasury" passes the Senate, but is tabled in the House
October 2	Bank failure lead to omission of 4 th installment deposits under the Surplus Revenue Act
October 12	Congress authorizes printing and distribution of \$10 million "backed" banknotes
November 7	Abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy is murdered by an angry white mob in Alton, Illinois
November	John Brown "consecrates his life to ending slavery" at memorial service for Lovejoy
December 8	Wendell Phillips responds to Lovejoy's death with his first abolitionist speech
December 19	"Gag Rule" renewed, with South seeking affirmation that "slavery must be protected"
Year	Massachusetts Board of Education head Horace Mann reforms teaching systems
1838	
January 10	Calhoun speaks to the Senate about "the importance of domestic slavery"
January 27	Abraham Lincoln addresses Springfield Lyceum about Lovejoy's murder & lawlessness
January 3-12	Senate affirms Calhoun resolution positively "affirming slavery as a legal institution"
February 15	JQ Adams defies Gag Rule by introducing 350 anti-slavery petitions on the House floor
February 16	Kentucky legislature grants suffrage to women who are widows with school age children
February 24	Kentucky Whig, William Graves kills Maine Democrat, John Cilley, in a rifle duel.
March 26	House opposes Van Buren's wish to create an Independent Treasury not tied to banks
May 17	White mob burns the Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia after an anti-slavery meeting
May 21	Jackson's Specie Circular Order is repealed in a joint resolution of congress
June 12	The House finally passes the Independent Treasury bill by 17 votes
August 13	New York banks resume payouts of dollars in gold/silver, but crisis not over
August 18	Charles Wilkes sets out on expedition to explore the Pacific and Antarctic
October 12	Texas withdraws annexation request and new President Lamar proposes a new nation

1838	
October	Remaining Cherokees removed from their eastern lands
November	Van Buren suffers congressional losses in the mid-term election
November 7	Henry Seward is elected Governor of New York
December 3	The abolitionist Joshua Giddings is elected to the House
Year	Underground Railroad is formed to help run-away slaves
1839	
February 7	Henry Clay attacks abolitionists for risking civil war during senate debate
February 12	Maine and New Brunswick dispute lumber rights along the Aroostook River
February 20	Congress outlaws dueling in the District of Columbia
August	Slaves aboard the <i>Amistad</i> overthrow and kill their white crew and land on Long Island
September 25	France recognizes Texas as a new nation
November 13	The Liberty Party is founded by Tappan & Birney producing schism with Garrison
December 4	Whig convention nominates William Henry Harrison after Clay drops out for harmony
1840	
January 19	Wilkes Expedition sights Antarctica
March 31	Van Buren signs bill mandating a 10 hour workday for public employees
April 1	The abolitionist Liberty Party convention nominates James Birney for president
May 5	Democrats nominate Van Buren on platform that supports Southern slavery
June 12-23	Anti-Slavery Convention in London denies women delegates prompting backlash
June 30	The House finally passes the Independent Treasury Act
July 4	The Independent Treasury begins to house federal funds and stabilize the money supply
November 13	Britain recognizes the nation of Texas
December 2	The Whig William Henry Harrison is elected president
1841	
March 4	Harrison inaugurated

While tilted overall toward the loss column, Van Buren does record some small victories. The “Wilkes Expedition” explores and maps the Pacific Ocean and Antarctica; a border dispute between Maine and New Brunswick over lumber rights along the Aroostook River is resolved short of warfare; and “progress” continues on the transport of the eastern tribes across the Mississippi.

By 1840 per capita GDP drops sharply as a result of the financial stress caused by Jackson’s “Specie Circular” attempt to constrain land speculation and stabilize the value of the dollar. It will not be until 1847, during the Mexican War, when the broad American public enjoys another sizable jump in personal wealth.

Economic Overview: Martin Van Buren’s Presidency

	1837	1838	1839	1840
Total GDP (\$000)	1554	1598	1661	1574
% Change	5%	3%	4%	(5%)
Per Capita GDP	98	98	100	92

Martin Van Buren will live on for twenty-one years after exiting the Presidency, first enjoying the life of the “country squire” back in Kinderhook before returning to the political arena, hoping to regain his magical touch within the Democrat Party. But it is not to be.

He is actually favored to win the 1844 nomination, but again refuses to back the annexation of Texas. This costs him support from Southerners and Andrew Jackson, and hands the top spot to James Knox Polk.

By 1848 he feels betrayed by the Democrats and agrees to head the ticket of the new “Free Soil Party.”

During a losing campaign, Van Buren asserts that Congress has the power to limit the spread of slavery to the west – an argument that costs the Democrats a sizable number of Northern white voters, and sets the stage for the rise in 1856 of the Republican Party.

During his waning years, Van Buren does his best to support those trying to hold the Union together. He lives into the second year of the war, finally succumbing on July 24, 1862. Lincoln, who befriends Van Buren in 1842, honors his death by declaring a public day of mourning and ordering all flags to fly at half-mast.