

1837f. President Martin Van Buren: Man of Contradiction or Political Chameleon?

Sources: <http://www.pressroom.com/~afrimale/vanburen.htm>

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASburen.htm>

www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/mb8.html

President Martin Van Buren was born in the small Dutch village of Kinderhook, New York in 1782. His father, who operated a farm and tavern, also owned six enslaved African Americans. While Martin Van Buren personally espoused anti-slavery views for most of his adult life, he also owned an enslaved African man named "Tom." At one point, "Tom" escaped from Van Buren and remained free for ten years before he was recaptured. Van Buren decided to sell him to his captor for fifty dollars.

As a founder of the modern Democratic Party, Martin Van Buren held numerous New York State and national offices. He served in the New York State Senate, as state attorney general, and Secretary of State, Vice President and President of the United States. After he was defeated for re-election in 1840, Van Buren became active in the campaign to block the extension of slavery into new territories and in 1848 he was the presidential candidate of the Free-Soil Party. He later joined the Republican Party and supported Abraham Lincoln for President.

Early in his career, Martin Van Buren argued that slavery was "an evil of the first magnitude" and that he had a sacred obligation to fight against its growth. He voted to extend voting rights to property-holding Blacks in New York State. As he became more prominent in the national Democratic Party, Van Buren changed his position, arguing that while slavery was morally wrong, attacking the slave system violated the constitutional principle of states' rights. As a candidate for President, Van Buren assured slaveowners that he and the entire northern white population, had no desire to intervene in their local affairs and was prohibited from doing so by the Constitution. He promised that as President, he would protect their property rights as slaveowners. However, some historians believe that he blocked the annexation of Texas because it would enter the union as a slave state.

After his defeat for reelection in 1840, Van Buren changed his position on slavery again. He became a "Free Soiler" because he believed that free White labor could never compete economically with enslaved Africans and he decided that Congress had the authority to prevent the extension of slavery into new territories and abolish slavery in the District of Columbia.

Martin Van Buren's 1837 Inaugural Address

Source: www.juntosociety.com/inaugural/vanburen.html

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 a forbearance so evidently wise that in spite of every sinister foreboding it never until the present period disturbed the tranquillity of our common country. . . . 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 least they will be my standard of conduct in the path before me. I then declared that if the desire of those of my countrymen who were favorable to my election was gratified "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." I submitted also to my fellow-citizens, with fullness and frankness, the reasons which led me to this determination. The result authorizes me to believe that they have been approved and are confided in 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. 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. Here and there, indeed, scenes of dangerous excitement have occurred, terrifying instances of local violence have been witnessed, and a reckless disregard of the consequences of their conduct has exposed individuals to popular indignation; but neither masses of the people nor sections of the country have been swerved from their devotion to the bond of union and the principles it has made sacred. It will be ever thus. Such attempts at dangerous agitation may periodically return, but with each the object will be better understood. That predominating affection for our political system which prevails throughout our territorial limits, that calm and enlightened judgment which ultimately governs our people as one vast body, will always be at hand to resist and control every effort, foreign or domestic, which aims or would lead to overthrow our institutions.