

Strategy Research Project

Martin Van Buren: Old Hickory's Strategic Advisor

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Abstract

Most popularly known as the 8th President of the United States, Martin Van Buren's greater impact and legacy is best understood through his role as one of his predecessor's most influential strategic advisors. As Secretary of State, emissary to Britain, Vice President, and a key member of Andrew Jackson's "kitchen cabinet," Van Buren's influence was undeniable. The establishment of the Modern Democratic Party, the Indian Removal Act, the Petticoat Affair and the Nullification Crisis all occurred during Jackson's two terms in office (1829-1837) and Martin Van Buren played an historic role in shaping key Jacksonian policies that in turn shaped this nation. As another political outsider like Jackson takes office as the 45th President of the United States, Van Buren's success and influence remain critically relevant for the aspiring strategic advisor today.

Martin Van Buren: Old Hickory's Strategic Advisor

...the American people looked ahead to the presidency of Andrew Jackson with a mixture of enthusiasm and anxiety.

—Daniel B. Cole¹

From 1789 to 1829, from George Washington to John Quincy Adams, the presidency of the United States seemed reserved for the country's Founding Fathers, and in the case of John Quincy, their progeny. They were the original American aristocrats. But on March 4, 1829, American politics changed forever. It was then that a brash, boisterous, frontiersman from Tennessee was elected to the highest office in the land, almost in direct opposition to the ruling elite. The President-elect, Andrew Jackson, was undeniably a strong personality. But in the face of significant political change and opposition to the incoming administration, the challenges of successful governance would be significant. "Confusion loomed in Washington, for Jackson was about to take over an executive branch of government that was dominated by Adams men."² To be successful, Andrew Jackson would need help, and he would need advisors that could aid his administration during some of the foundational events in our nation's history. Enter Martin Van Buren.

Most popularly known as the 8th President of the United States, Martin Van Buren's greater impact and legacy is best understood through his role as one of Jackson's most influential strategic advisors. As Secretary of State, emissary to Britain, Vice President, and a key member of Andrew Jackson's "kitchen cabinet," Van Buren's influence is undeniable. The establishment of the Modern Democratic Party, the Indian Removal Act, the Petticoat Affair and the Nullification Crisis, among other key issues, all occurred during Jackson's two terms in office (1829 – 1837) and Martin Van Buren,

therefore, played an historic role in shaping policies that shaped this nation. And the similarities between the American political landscape of 1828 and 2016 are too obvious to discount. In both elections, a political outsider with populist appeal entered the arena rejecting centralized power ('Federalism' in 1828, 'Globalism' in 2016) to the surprise of the ruling elite. Van Buren's success and influence on Jackson was undeniable; for the aspiring strategic advisor today, his work serves as a significant example to emulate, and given the political similarities, his influence as an advisor is more applicable today than ever. As another political outsider like Jackson takes office as the 45th President of the United States, the role of the Strategic Advisor remains critically relevant.

What It Takes to be a Good Strategic Advisor

Leaders understand that one of the most important prerequisites to inform *effective* decision making, particularly at the senior level, is sound advice.³ In 1829, Andrew Jackson certainly understood this fact well. And whether in government service or in private industry, the best senior leaders understand that the best strategic advisors possess core competencies and surround themselves with advisors that possess those traits. Although effective leaders understand that good advice is important, and that their advisors should possess certain traits in order to be effective, opinions vary as to what comprises these core competencies. It could be argued that when selecting potential strategic advisors, most leaders rely too much on qualitative personality assessments than quantitatively defining core competencies first, and then assessing for these competencies. At first glance, consensus of what these core competencies should be might seem elusive. In his book *Why Should the Boss Listen to You?*, James Lukaszewski identifies the following imperatives⁴ and disciplines⁵ for the trusted strategic advisor:

Five Imperatives for the Trusted Strategic Advisor

- Jettison Staff-based assumptions
- See the whole board
- Tolerate constructive ambiguity, but strive for certainty
- Maximize your prerogatives
- Develop real expertise beyond your staff function

Seven Disciplines

- Be trustworthy - Earn the respect and confidence of those you advise.
- Becoming a verbal visionary - Recognize that giving advice is an art and a skill that primarily depends on your verbal accomplishment.
- Developing a management perspective - Look at the world through the leader's eyes.
- Thinking strategically - Looking for methods and models to achieve different, novel, often unique solutions.
- Understanding the power of patterns - Examine similar events to extract lessons for the future.
- Advising constructively - Provide advice using a structure, format, and context that can easily be both absorbed and acted on by those you advise.
- Showing the boss how to use your advice - Showing the boss how to put your advice into practice is essential.⁶

On 6 Feb 2017, a panel from the Association of the United States Army identified traits similar to Lukszewski's: trust, communication, courage, integrity, and knowledge were all valued core competencies.⁷ On 10 Feb 2017, an advisor on President Trump's National Security Council succinctly identified four essential strategic advisor attributes: conduct good analysis, gain access, possess the ability to articulate that analysis, and anticipation.⁸ And during a panel discussion with the USAWC's Advanced Strategic Arts Program, a noted expert representing Johns Hopkins University said effective strategic advising depends upon the four virtues of empathy, curiosity, humility, and courage as central to providing effective strategic advice.⁹ Clearly, there is overlap, and even consensus, among the contemporary experts, and most historians familiar with the historic Jackson-Van Buren relationship would undeniably agree. Both John Niven and Robert Remini, two eminent Van Buren scholars, laud Van Buren's contributions to the

Jackson administration as his most trusted strategic advisor; Remini even describes Van Buren as the greatest politician of his day.¹⁰ The main argument each of these experts asserts is clear: the effective strategic advisor must possess several key attributes, namely, trust, access, competence, courage, and communication (also known as TAC³). As a key strategic advisor to Jackson, Martin Van Buren certainly possessed these traits, and this fact was the key to his overall success and influence during the Jackson administration.

Trust

Trust is the foundation on which successful advisors rely, and it is a summation of the other competencies. It implies integrity. No leader, strategic or otherwise, would sanely rely on advice from someone they did not trust. All leaders, and certainly every President, seek trusted advisors. Every advisor should also know that the cliché holds true--trust must be earned; it cannot be given.

Access

An advisor must have access to the boss because without access, the advisor will not have the opportunity to provide advice. Particularly for the new advisor, access must be earned, and it is gained by being competent. An advisor must actively seek ways to be relevant to his leadership. Interpersonal skills are important.

Competence

Competence is the bedrock for successful strategic advising and leaders must believe that their advisors are experts. Otherwise, their advice is meaningless. Strategic advisors must seek to be experts in their field.

Courage

Providing advice to the boss that might be unpleasant or unpopular takes

courage. But at its essence, telling the boss what he *wants* to hear rather than what he *needs* to hear is an insidious form of disloyalty. Strategic advisors must be factual, and free of promoting hidden agendas.

Communication

Perhaps most importantly, a strategic advisor must be able to communicate his message, both in person and in writing. Poor advisors forget that effective communication depends most on considering the audience. Effective strategic advisors must be capable of reading, writing, and speaking in the English language or the native tongue of the strategic leader.

Becoming a Strategic Advisor

Martin Van Buren was an unlikely national leader. Like Andrew Jackson, Van Buren hailed from humble beginnings. He was born December 5, 1782 in Kinderhook, NY; both his mother and father were of Dutch decent. Unlike most of the Founding Fathers and other national leaders of the time, he was not born to a family connected to the political elite, nor was his family especially affluent. His family offered a nurturing environment, however, and Martin's father, Abraham Van Buren, was well respected and liked in his small community. The Van Burens owned and operated a farm and tavern and it was in his father's tavern, as a boy, that Martin gained his first exposure to politics. Because it was good for his business and common practice in rural America at the time, Abraham allowed his tavern to be used both as a polling place and as a rendezvous point for partisans of the day. This exposure to local politics from a very early age played a significant role in Martin's attraction to public service, the law, and eventually politics. He was a naturally curious young man and gained a reputation for being intellectually gifted from an early age, displaying an aptitude for political

leadership and careful advice very early. Certainly, his competence and speaking abilities were well known. “From his childhood Martin gave tokens of more than ordinary brightness. At a very early age he was in the village academy, where he obtained some knowledge of Latin and attracted notice by his fondness for composition and for elocutionary exercises.” But although he was gifted, since he was also from humble beginnings, the prospect of going to college was unlikely. His family did, however, ensure that he stayed in school until he was fifteen.¹¹

During Martin’s childhood and upbringing, the town of Kinderhook had a decided Federalist leaning and his primary mentor, a local lawyer named Francis Sylvester, strongly influenced him.¹² But after he was admitted to the Columbia County Bar having never attended law school, Martin became more enamored with the Jeffersonian Republican party. “The young law clerk had imbibed some Jeffersonian notions from his father and more from his reading of the New York City papers, enough to convince him that Jeffersonian principles and politics were about to sweep the county.”¹³ And young Martin was correct in his predilections. The Jeffersonian principles of anti-Federalism, anti-aristocracy, and populism based on an informed electorate of “plain folks” were indeed about to sweep the country. Although Andrew Jackson’s ascension to the Presidency was still decades away, with the help of Martin Van Buren, this new populism would eventually grow into Jackson’s Democratic party.

Van Buren’s rise to political leadership began with his study of the law. It was there, as a law clerk in his home of Kinderhook, that he came to work closely with the politically connected Van Ness family. “The Van Ness brothers were older, better educated and much more self-assured than...Martin Van Buren.” But the young man

quickly made himself indispensable with his strong memory, analytical abilities, and acquired poise. According to one chronicler, John P. Van Ness “owed his congressional seat largely to Van Buren’s efforts and advice.” Eventually, Van Ness even introduced Van Buren to Aaron Burr, a man whom many thought was destined for the Presidency; despite his later fall from grace, Burr was extremely connected and a prominent politician of the day. These types of political connections led to Van Buren’s election to the New York State Senate in 1813. It was as a New York Senator that Van Buren was instrumental in shaping what would evolve into the Democratic Party. In 1821, Martin Van Buren was elected to the United States Senate where his political capital continued to grow. And it was as the United States Senator from New York that he gained national attention and the admiration of “Old Hickory,” General Andrew Jackson.¹⁴

Many historians would argue that Andrew Jackson’s presidency was inevitable. It had been forty years since the father of the country, George Washington, took office and after six Presidents, each a political elite, the country was domestically ripe for change. Internationally, our young country’s reputation had atrophied significantly and the United States no longer enjoyed a strong reputation among foreign powers. In fact, in 1829, “Our foreign relations at the time [Andrew Jackson] came into office, were in a most embarrassed condition.”¹⁵ Simply put, the country was ready for new political leadership and eager to pursue a new course. The election of 1828 bore that fact out clearly. A new populism, one that rejected Federalism and the political elite, was being born. In retrospect, the result of the election of 1828 seemed like a foregone conclusion; Andrew Jackson and his running-mate, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina,

won the election handily. And four years later in 1832, with Martin Van Buren on the ticket in lieu of Calhoun, the presidential and vice-presidential elections were landslides. By 1832, “Of two hundred and eighty-six electoral votes, General Jackson received two hundred and nineteen, and Mr. Van Buren one hundred and eighty-nine.”¹⁶ But in 1828 the resentment for the newly elected ticket, and for Andrew Jackson in particular, was palpable. Like today with President Trump, General Jackson bore the brunt of significant political attacks, mostly due to his status as an outsider. And also like today, he endured personal attacks as well as charges of being “un-Presidential.” “Among other things, the private character and public acts of General Jackson were subjected to a severe and rigid scrutiny. The circumstances attending his marriage, his conduct during the campaign against the Creeks, the attack on Pensacola, the arrest of Judge Hall, and the trial and merited punishment of Arbuthnot and Ambrister, were commented on in the harshest terms, and in many instances grossly misrepresented. These uncalled for attacks produced no effect on the public mind, except that of enlisting a warmer feeling of sympathy in his behalf, and animating his friends to renewed exertion.”¹⁷ Arguably similar to 2016 and the successful election of the country’s 45th President, the attacks from the political establishment actually served to bolster Jackson’s popularity with the common people.

For his first term, Jackson selected Martin Van Buren to serve as his most important de-facto strategic advisor, his Secretary of State, and immediately upon assuming the office, Van Buren’s influence was felt. “Upon the accession of General Jackson to the presidency, and of Mr. Van Buren to the Department of State, the character of our intercourse with foreign nations was entirely changed...under the

guidance of our single-minded and upright President, Mr. Van Buren was enabled to turn his rare abilities to the greatest public benefit.”¹⁸ The reliance that Jackson placed in his most capable strategic advisor is evident early in the administration and Jackson frequently solicited his advice. Early in his presidency, in an effort to determine how to reply to the Cherokee Nation’s claim of Georgia’s “wanton usurpation of power,” The President sent the following undated note: “The President send [sic] the enclosed for the perusal of Mr. Van Buren and asks him to say whether the constitutional *law* embraced therein is consistent with his views. The P[resident] will thank him to return with his remarks on the paper this evening, as the chiefs of the Cherokee are awaiting this reply[.] yrs. A.J.”¹⁹ Because Martin Van Buren possessed the five attributes required of an effective strategic advisor and had successfully incorporated them by this time, Jackson clearly valued his advice and their relationship only strengthened throughout Jackson’s two terms. Based on Van Buren’s legal advice, and to the dismay of the Cherokee Nation, President Jackson informed them that the issue did not involve the Federal Government and would have to be resolved with the state of Georgia. Although the Supreme Court would eventually disagree, the whole affair led directly to the infamous Indian Removal Act.²⁰

Secretary of State and the Modern Democratic Party

From the very beginning of his presidency, it was clear that Andrew Jackson, along with most other political actors of the time, held Martin Van Buren in the highest esteem. For Jackson, Van Buren’s political ideology was a necessary prerequisite, but his reputation for statesmanship preceded him. Prior to assuming the duties of the Presidency, Jackson was enamored with Van Buren’s acumen; he eventually referred to him as the “Little Magician” due to his impressive political abilities. So when assembling

his cabinet, Jackson naturally thought of the able Van Buren to become a prominent trusted advisor. Van Buren would also provide the additional political benefit of being from a northern state. In his official correspondence offering the Secretary of State to Van Buren, Jackson clearly shared his impression of him and implied that he possessed the core competencies he required of his advisors: “Washington City Febry 15th 1829 – Sir – I am now at the seat of Government[sic], ready to enter on the high duties that my country has so flatteringly assigned me. My first and strong desire, is to have associated with me in the discharge of my responsible trust, men, in whom, under all exigencies, I can repose – I have thought of you; and trusting in your intelligence & sound Judgment, my desire is that you shall take charge of the *Department of State*.”²¹

From the outset, Jackson knew Van Buren was a competent political actor and a man to be trusted, two of the five advisor core competencies. But Jackson was not the only leader of the day to admire Van Buren so highly. On January 8, 1830, Alfred Balch, a Nashville lawyer and Jackson confidant, provided his highly flattering opinion of Van Buren as a statesman to the new President, “I hope you will not be disappointed in your expectations and findings [of] Mr. V. Buren a safe and efficient *Statesman* – of politicians we have myriads...But, statesmen are as rare as Immortal & fine poets. My fervent hope is that V. Buren may realize the high estimation in which I have long held him – When that day shall arrive that he will be before the people of Ten.[nessee] as a candidate, I shall draw the sword in his cause and throw away the scabbard.”²² In another letter dated April 10, 1830, a former Army officer in the Tennessee militia who had served under Andrew Jackson, Mr. John Coffee, wrote of Martin Van Buren’s trustworthiness, “It is plain Mr Van Buren whose situation has identified him with the

success of the administration, could not be using his influence against it – no, he is firm to the core...”²³

Jackson and Van Buren’s relationship strengthened with time and Van Buren remained a key advisor throughout Jackson’s two terms in office. Jackson clearly thought of Van Buren as trusted and competent, and Jackson had given him access to the presidential inner-circle. But Jackson also had practical considerations. He needed a man who also possessed the final two of the five attributes, courage and communication skills, in order to fully realize his vision for a new American Democracy and ultimately, his other political ambitions. General Jackson succinctly considered Van Buren’s impact on him, and his reason for selecting him to serve as the Secretary of State, in a letter to the Democratic Republican members of the Legislature of New York, in February 1832: “In calling him (Mr. Van Buren), to the Department of State, from the exalted station he then occupied, by the suffrages of the people of his native state, I was not influenced more by his acknowledged talents and public services, than by the general wish and expectation of the republican party throughout the union.”²⁴ Jackson understood that only a northern politician could best communicate his political message in the North and would have the courage to do so. Pointedly, Jackson chose Van Buren to serve as the Secretary of State and his trusted strategic advisor because Van Buren possessed the five core competencies.

Martin Van Buren humbly accepted Jackson’s invitation and in response to Jackson’s request, Van Buren sent the following from Albany on February 20, 1829: “Sir – Your favour [sic] of the 15th instant proposing to assign to me the Department of State in the administration about to be formed under your auspices, was received

yesterday. With an expression of my gratitude for the favourable [sic] opinion you have formed of me & the very flattering manner in which you expressed it, I have to say that I accept your invitation with no other hesitation except such as is derived from a distrust of my fitness for the high Station to which you have been pleased to call me.”²⁵

Although popular with most of the American people, Andrew Jackson and his administration were still political outsiders, and the political elite would not give up power simply because of an election. The entrenched Federalists in Congress and among the urban, mercantile elite would challenge Jackson routinely; the polarity with his popularity in the backcountry was reminiscent of today’s political landscape. But with the President and his chief strategic advisor in place, a new political reality was being born--Jacksonian Democracy--and the new Jackson administration was set to go about conducting the nation’s business. The advisor, Martin Van Buren, enjoyed unequalled success; his impact was significant, enduring, and immediate: “In short, the supervision of a master-spirit appeared in every branch of our foreign relations; and a series of diplomatic successes were effected, unrivaled in their number and importance in any other equal period of time, since the formation of our government. It was universally conceded, that more distinguished ability had never been displayed in the Department of State, since the period when it was under the direction of Jefferson.”²⁶

The Petticoat Affair

Surprisingly, many modern Americans do not have an appreciation for the historically partisan nature of American politics. Many believe the political polarity of 2016 is new, but this is simply a misunderstanding of our history. Andrew Jackson’s campaign, election, and particularly the disdain shown him by many politicians in his first term serve as a case in point. Unlike current practice where both the President and

Vice President run on a combined ticket, technically the Constitution states that both offices are chosen independently, and until the late 19th Century, this occasionally caused political division between the two offices. This was certainly the case in 1828. John C. Calhoun, President Jackson's first Vice President, was by no means a Jackson confidant. In fact, Calhoun's own political ambition was well known, and it arguably contributed to one of the most troubling episodes in our country's history, which ultimately resulted in the resignation of virtually all of President Jackson's cabinet. The ordeal is popularly known as the Petticoat Affair. "In the winter of 1830, considerable ill feeling was produced in his [Jackson's] cabinet, particularly on the part of the friends of the vice-president, Mr. Calhoun, growing out of what was said to be the especial favor shown to Mr. Van Buren, secretary of state. An unfortunate difficulty in regard to the family relations of several members of the cabinet, increased this ill-feeling to such an extent, that Mr. Van Buren, and Mr. Eaton, the secretary of war, tendered their resignations in April, 1831."²⁷ The whole escapade centered on the spouses of Washington's political elite (the "petticoats"), led by John C. Calhoun's wife Floride, ostracizing from social events John Eaton, Jackson's Secretary of State, and his wife Peggy. Not only did these "petticoats" question the conditions under which the Eatons were married, they argued against her suitability to be included in Washington society at all. Jackson himself was particularly distraught by this seemingly trivial matter due to his own status as a political outsider, not to mention similarities to his own marriage. The President was personally affronted by the snobbery. Ultimately, Van Buren and other members of his cabinet took the moral high ground and chose to resign rather than continue to let the issue be a distraction to the administration, demonstrating the

same type of courage required of the strategic advisor. Although Jackson relented and accepted Van Buren's resignation, he later greatly missed Van Buren and his cabinet. In a letter dated September 5, 1831, Jackson indicated the high value he placed on his previous cabinet: "Notwithstanding the high opinion I entertain of the talents & worth of my present Cabinet, & the confidence I have in them – still, there appears a vacuum occasioned by your absence, & our faithful Eaton, that is not filled...I cannot close without again repeating, that I hope circumstances will occur to enable me to retire to the Hermitage in due season, & set an example, worthy to be followed, and give an evidence to my Country, that I never had any other ambition but of that of serving my country, when she required it, and when I knew it could be better served by others, to open the door for their employment – *you will understand me.*"²⁸ In this letter, Jackson implied that the country would be better served by others--that is by Van Buren himself--soon enough. The esteem in which Jackson held his most trusted strategic advisor was apparent.

Emissary to Great Britain and Grooming for the Future

The President's faith in Van Buren endured the Petticoat Affair and he remained loyal to his most trusted advisor. With Van Buren, Jackson realized he had an advisor who possessed the five core competencies of the strategic advisor, and therefore decided to retain his services, but this time in another capacity, that of emissary to Great Britain. "The unimpaired confidence of General Jackson, in the abilities and integrity of Mr. Van Buren, was manifested, immediately upon his withdrawal from the Department of State, by pressing upon his acceptance the mission to the court of St. James." Van Buren accepted the post, was dispatched to Europe, and awaited Congressional confirmation. But due to an unprecedented twist of fate that confirmation

never came. As Vice President, John C. Calhoun, Van Buren's nemesis, was also President of the Senate, and he cast the tie-breaking vote opposing Van Buren's nomination. "His nomination was submitted to the Senate, on the 7th of January 1832; and on the 26th of the same month, rejected, by the casting vote of the Vice President. It is almost superfluous to review the grounds of this most reprehensible and factious act, since it has received the emphatic condemnation of the American people." Even though Van Buren was widely respected and acknowledged to be the best candidate for the position, Calhoun's partisanship and jealousy tainted his vote. "Mr. Van Buren's great experience in political affairs, his intimate knowledge of all our foreign relations, his sagacity, firmness, and self-possession; his high sense of national honor, and his well-trying patriotism, combined to designate him as the most proper person to manage these important interests."²⁹

To say that President Jackson hated his first Vice President would be an understatement. He not only despised Calhoun and the turmoil caused during the Petticoat Affair, but he soon began to plan retaliation for the dishonor done to his most trusted advisors, including Martin Van Buren. In Jackson's letter to Mr. John Coffee, his Tennessee militia colleague, his hate for Calhoun, his admiration for Van Buren, and his plan for redemption were clear. Dated January 21, 1832, Jackson wrote, "I have no hesitation in saying that Calhoun is one of the most base hypocritical & unprincipled villains in the United States – his course in secrete [sic] session, and vote in the case of Mr Van Buren, has displayed a want of every sense of honor, justice or magnanimity – his vote has damd [sic] him by all honest men in the Senate, and when laid before the nation, and laid it will be, will not only dam [sic] him & his associates, but astonish the

American people...The Senate would reject Van Buren for his virtues, but it dare not the factious & unprincipled opposition know that his rejection would first make him Vice President, & then President.”³⁰

So in another truly historic twist of fate, President Jackson began to implement his plan to groom his most trusted strategic advisor for the Vice Presidency, replacing the detested Calhoun, and prepare Van Buren for the Presidency itself. As early as September 18, 1831, Jackson’s plans began to take form. In a letter to his trusted advisor, he hints to Van Buren of his desire for him to eventually succeed him as President: “All things appear well at present; But my dr Sir the opposition is constant in their abuse...How disgusting this to a virtuous mind, & how I long for retirement to the peaceful shades of the Hermitage...The slanders of the wicked part of the opposition have truly disgusted me, I therefore wish how soon I may be able, with honor, to resign the trust committed to me to another, & a better hand...”³¹ The “better hand,” to Jackson’s estimate, was Martin Van Buren.

By the end of 1831, Jackson was no longer merely hinting of Van Buren’s potential to be his successor. Due to Van Buren’s proven abilities as a trusted advisor, Jackson was all but offering the Vice Presidency to him, not to mention his desire for him to return to his inner-circle. In a letter dated December 6, 1831, Jackson again referred to his present cabinet and then made an astonishing show of admiration: “...but with all their talents, & the confidence I have in them, still, I miss you, & Eaton, very much. I do hope, that, in the *selection of a vice president*, I may be placed in such a situation at the time I have heretofore suggested to you to withdraw to the peaceful

shades of the Hermitage, from the busy scenes of public life – on this subject, I will write you fully in a few months.”³²

Throughout his first term, despite the forced intermissions of the Petticoat Affair and the failure of his ministerial confirmation, Martin Van Buren proved to be Jackson’s most trusted strategic advisor. He possessed the core competencies one needed for success in this role. He was trustworthy, competent, had unfettered access, was courageous, and could communicate, particularly to northerners. Not only is it a testament to the value Jackson had in Van Buren, but the fact that Van Buren was elected Vice President himself in 1831, thereby replacing his detractor Calhoun, is one of the most poetically just episodes in our nation’s history. “History rarely presents so splendid an example of retributive justice, as appears in the election of Mr. Van Buren to the Vice Presidency. Him whom the Senate had adjudged unfit to represent the nation in a foreign court, the sovereign people honored with the second office in the government.”³³

Nullification Crisis

The powers ceded to the central government have been perhaps the most consistently controversial issues throughout American history. The Framers of the Constitution replaced, with significant public debate, the Articles of Confederation because of the limited powers it provided our Federal government. The theme arose again during the War of 1812 during the Hartford Convention and was central to the origins of the Civil War, and it could be argued that it remains a fundamental issue in contemporary political issues given current debates on globalization or the rights of state and local governments vis-à-vis Federal immigration and drug laws. The issue was no less contentious for the Jackson administration. The Nullification Crisis was the

first time in our nation's history in which the question of states rights versus Federal sovereignty was nearly decided with force, and Martin Van Buren's strategic advice was key to resolving the crisis peacefully. The schism that helped create the Civil War thirty years later was stalled in no small part by the sage wisdom of the Little Magician.

The Tariff of 1828, or as it was known in the Southern coastal states, the Tariff of Abominations, passed Congress on May 19, 1828, with a purpose to protect northern industrial production by placing heavy taxes on all imported goods. As it would later during the Secession Crisis, the State of South Carolina played a prominent role in instigating resistance, as did Van Buren's nemesis, John C. Calhoun. South Carolinians, led by Calhoun, claimed that the Tariff overtly favored northern industrial interests over southern states rights and would end up ruining southern commerce by reducing the trading power of southern staple crops, most of which were then exported to Europe. As a sovereign state that retained at least a portion of its autonomy under Calhoun's interpretation of the Constitution, South Carolina claimed the right to "nullify" the tariff to protect its self-interest. An original Southerner himself (born on the border of North and South Carolina), and a quasi-Southerner by virtue of being a Tennessean (Tennessee was then thought of as a frontier state), Andrew Jackson did not agree with the tariff personally. He actually sympathized with the tariff's opponents. But he was adamantly opposed to South Carolina's position and clearly believed the state had no right to nullify Federal Law. And South Carolina threatened to do just that. Jackson considered the idea of nullification to be treasonous, and he threatened to enforce the tariff with military force if necessary. "I consider the power to annul a law of the United States, assumed by one State, incompatible with the existence of the Union,

contradicted expressly by the letter of the Constitution, unauthorized by its spirit, inconsistent with every principle on which it was founded, and destructive of the great object for which it was formed.”³⁴ For a tense period of time, the country seemed to teeter at the precipice of civil war.

Andrew Jackson did not want to fight, but he could not allow South Carolina to nullify Federal Law. The situation was so tenuous that the Attorney for the State of South Carolina refused to enforce the tariff and tendered his resignation. In order to assess the crisis properly, Jackson directed his trusted advisor, Martin Van Buren, to dispatch an agent to ascertain the situation. In a private letter to Van Buren dated July 23, 1831, regarding the Attorney’s resignation and his specific guidance, Jackson opined, “The question first that occurred to me, was, to direct an agent to institute the suit, refuse his resignation, & impeach him for neglect of duty – but the better I think will be to accept his resignation, appoint another, and send instructions to bring the suit, & prosecute it with energy – in the mean time send on a private agent to look & enquire, and take necessary testimony to expose all who are engaged in this act of intended Treason against our Government...The *union shall be preserved*.”³⁵

Among others whom the President consulted, Van Buren advised caution, and further advised Jackson to tone down his harsh rhetoric. This, he thought, would build support among other Southern states. In response to the President, Martin Van Buren replied on July 29, 1831, “I can add nothing to the course you suggest in regard to the Carolina affair except what will occur to you to see that the inquiries of the agent there be conducted with the greatest caution so as not to cause unnecessary excitement – perhaps the agency itself might be dispensed with until the new District Attorney reports

to you. The course you propose of a new appointment instead of an impeachment &c is certainly preferable & every minute step in a matter of so much delicacy cannot be too deeply considered.”³⁶ By telling Jackson to dial down his fiery rhetoric, Martin Van Buren in his role as a strategic advisor likely postponed the American Civil War.

Van Buren also used his political weight in New York to solidify backing for the President’s position. This approach allowed Jackson to resolve the issue politically rather than militarily, essentially preventing an internecine conflict with South Carolina. In the 1830s, New York was arguably the most powerful state in the Union and its support would be extremely useful. To gain it, Van Buren wrote to the New York Legislature in 1833 in a successful effort to further isolate South Carolina, arguing that “nullification was a perversion of states’ rights as dangerous to liberty with union as the pronouncements of the ultra-Federalists...”³⁷ Illustrating his competence, courage, and communication skills, President Jackson’s best strategic advisor helped keep the peace in a time of great national turmoil.

By 1833, a compromise was reached without a shot being fired. The Compromise Tariff was passed by Congress and not resisted by South Carolina, effectively resolving the Nullification Crisis.³⁸ Martin Van Buren was a critical advisor throughout the whole ordeal. Andrew Jackson relied on his advice heavily during this time, and largely as a result of Van Buren’s steadfast performance and political acumen, the Nullification Crisis helped Van Buren become the 8th U.S. President.

Relevance to Today

The role of the strategic advisor remains as relevant today as it was in 1828, and it will continue to remain significant as long as strategic leaders need trusted advice. In 1828, a political outsider gained the highest office in the land. In 2016, another political

outsider also gained the office of the Presidency. Similar to recent accusations against the Trump administration, there were charges made against the new Jackson administration of unseemly behavior and ineptitude. Particularly during politically polarizing times, the advice provided by a leader's advisors has the power not only to address the crisis, but in the case of the Jackson administration, to shape the future course of the country. To be effective, the advisor must first be trusted. Presently, President Donald Trump is surrounding himself with trusted agents throughout the National Security Council and in the Federal agencies in the face of significant political dissent. Early in his presidency, Andrew Jackson trusted Martin Van Buren, creating a prerequisite for the future advisor. In the military, in politics, and in business the leader at the top simply cannot depend on advisors whom he does not trust. Van Buren earned that trust by demonstrating loyalty and by sharing his leader's political outlook. The same can be said for contemporary leaders. President Trump has taken great criticism for placing within his cabinet personnel whom he personally trusts, including his Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, and his Vice President. As the National Security Advisor, LTG(R) Flynn violated the trust placed in him and was therefore asked to resign.

Secondly, a strategic advisor must have access. For those directly serving the President, this access is usually given pro forma, but when it is not given, the advisor must seek to gain that access or risk irrelevancy. In the early stages of Jackson's administration, during the Petticoat Affair, as an emissary to Great Britain, and during the Nullification Crisis Van Buren eagerly provided his advice and sought ways of being value-added to his leader. He made himself accessible to the President. Like today, an

advisor that rests on his laurels and is not forthcoming when needed will quickly be replaced. Third, advisors must be competent and be experts in their field. Jackson knew that Martin Van Buren understood well the political issues of his day, the changing nature of the American political landscape, and the international dynamics at play during our nation's first century, and Van Buren aptly demonstrated his competence, especially during the Nullification Crisis. Similarly, President Trump has attempted to select competent advisors for positions throughout his administration. No one would reasonably argue, for instance, that Gen(R) Mattis was not thoroughly qualified to serve as Secretary of Defense. In fact, President Trump publically prides himself on assembling his competent team of advisors. Fourth, advisors must also be willing to speak truth to power, to have the courage to dissent in the face of adversarial opinion. Martin Van Buren convinced Jackson to tone down the rhetoric during the Nullification Crisis and he also urged other states, especially New York, to refrain from siding with the radical views emanating from the Southern coastal states. Finally, a good strategic advisor must be able to communicate his message both orally and in writing. Clearly, Van Buren demonstrated a skill with the pen that was almost unrivaled in his day. Like the Little Magician, Vice President Pence, one of President Trump's most trusted advisors, is an effective communicator, especially in public speaking venues. For the foreseeable future, sound strategic advice will remain as relevant as it was in 1828; the aspiring strategic advisor would do well by emulating Martin Van Buren's service to the Jackson administration and the young United States of America.

Conclusion

Because of his superior abilities as a strategic advisor, Martin Van Buren's story did not end with Jackson's exit from American politics. During the eight years of

Jackson's presidency, Van Buren proved himself to be a master of the art. That masterful reputation led directly to his election as President after Andrew Jackson, and created vast opportunities for the young republic under his executive leadership. And Van Buren did not take this responsibility lightly nor fail to realize what had propelled him to the highest office in the land. In his very inaugural address, the new President alluded to his personal contributions to his predecessor's administration and the core competencies that he himself possessed: "In receiving from the people the sacred trust twice confided to my illustrious predecessor, and which he has discharged so faithfully and so well, I know that I can not expect to perform the arduous task with equal ability and success. But united as I have been in his counsels, a daily witness of his exclusive and unsurpassed devotion to his country's welfare, agreeing with him in sentiments which his countrymen have warmly supported, and permitted to partake largely of his confidence, I may hope that somewhat of the same cheering approbation will be found to attend upon my path."³⁹

Endnotes

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⁶ *Ibid.*

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⁸ Panel discussion with a confidential National Security Council source, February 10, 2017.

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¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 344.

¹⁷ John S. Jenkins, *Life and Public Services of Gen. Andrew Jackson: Seventh President of the United States; Including the Most Important of His State Papers* (Buffalo, NY: G.H. Derby and Co., 1852), 175-176.

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²³ *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁴ Holland, *The Life and Political Opinions of Martin Van Buren*, 323.

²⁵ Fetter et al., eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson, Volume VII*, 52.

²⁶ Holland, *The Life and Political Opinions of Martin Van Buren*, 330.

²⁷ Jenkins, *Life and Public Services of Gen. Andrew Jackson: Seventh President of the United States; Including the Most Important of His State Papers*, 178.

²⁸ Daniel Fetter et al., eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson, Volume IX, 1831* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013), 545.

²⁹ Holland, *The Life and Political Opinions of Martin Van Buren*, 333-335.

³⁰ Daniel Fetter et al., eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson, Volume X, 1832* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2016), 37.

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³² *Ibid.*, 732.

³³ Holland, *The Life and Political Opinions of Martin Van Buren*, 344.

³⁴ Lynch, *An Epoch and a Man*, 366.

³⁵ Fetter et al., eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson, Volume IX*, 415.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 447.

³⁷ Niven, *Martin Van Buren*, 325-326.

³⁸ Andrew Jackson, "Proclamation 43—Regarding the Nullifying Laws of South Carolina," December 10, 1832, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=67078> (accessed March 1, 2017).

³⁹ Martin van Buren, "Inaugural Address," March 4, 1837, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25812> (accessed March 1, 2017).