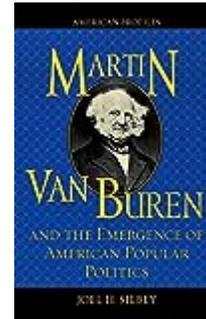




Joel Silbey. *Martin Van Buren and the Emergence of American Popular Politics.* Lanham and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002. xiv + 235 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-2243-5.



Reviewed by Thomas Coens (Harvard University)

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In the preface to his new study of Martin Van Buren, the political historian Joel Silbey admits that his subject has “not been shy of biographers,” but he makes a case for giving the Red Fox of Kinderhook another look (p. xiii).[1] Silbey promises a concise and fresh overview of Van Buren’s political career, one that pays particular attention to “the political world of his time as it evolved and hardened into a modern democracy” (p. xiv). Silbey succeeds admirably, and has produced a fine addition to the literature on Jacksonian politics. Not all readers will concur with Silbey’s evaluation of Van Buren’s career, or share his palpable admiration for the Little Magician. But by combining a sketch of Van Buren’s career with an analytical narrative of antebellum American politics—and all in 220 pages—this clearly written study will serve as an accessible and authoritative introduction to Jacksonian politics, one that teachers might effectively employ in the classroom.

The most impressive feature of Silbey’s study lies in its skillful interweaving of Van Buren’s political career within the larger story of American political development in the antebellum period. As he traces Van Buren’s rise to the presidency (and his equally fascinating post-1840 political career), Silbey recurs frequently to the dramatic political changes then sweeping the nation. The details of this story will be familiar to readers of Sil-

bey’s earlier works, *The Partisan Imperative* (1985) and *The American Political Nation* (1991). In the decades after the War of 1812 increasingly competitive political parties became characterized by greater popular participation and organizational sophistication.[2] This so-called “second party system” reached maturity in the late 1830s as voter participation soared to unparalleled heights and Whigs and Democrats entered a “new era of increasingly well-organized unity and policy coherence” (p. 140).

Silbey ascribes to Van Buren a major role in this transformation; throughout his career, Silbey contends, Van Buren was “the prime organizer, articulator, and manager of the nation’s political conflict” (p. 15). Silbey credits Van Buren and his Bucktail allies with formulating a “new ‘science of politics’” in the decades following the War of 1812 (p. 22). Through its strong emphasis on party organization, loyalty, and discipline, Van Buren’s party brought order to New York state’s chaotic politics of faction. Van Buren carried these values with him to Washington in 1821, where he played an equally crucial role in the reinvigoration and democratization of the nation’s parties.

Impressed by such accomplishments, Silbey designates Van Buren the “founding father of systematic political organization and popular mobilization” (p. 153). In doing so, Silbey follows common wisdom: both contem-

poraries of Van Buren and historians alike have accorded Van Buren a particularly important role in changing political attitudes and institutions during the antebellum period. *Martin Van Buren and the Emergence of American Popular Politics* heads a long list of books that in their very title articulate this association: others include Donald Cole's *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System* (1984); John Niven's *Martin Van Buren: The Romantic Age of American Politics* (1983); and Robert Remini's *Martin Van Buren and the Making of the Democratic Party* (1959). (It is somewhat remarkable that Richard Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition and the Men who Made It* [1957] did not devote a chapter to Van Buren; but Hofstadter more than compensated for this slight by making Van Buren the hero of his celebratory *Idea of A Party System* [1969]).

Both Silbey and his predecessors give Van Buren what seems to me far too much credit for the development of partisanship and partisan institutions in antebellum America. Most of the partisan practices Silbey credits Van Buren's party with innovating—the partisan newspaper, the state committee, the caucus (pp. 24-25)—originated in the 1790s and 1800s and were already familiar features of the political system in which Van Buren came of age. In the 1820s Van Buren's party consistently lagged behind their Clintonian, Adamsite, and Antimasonic opponents in the adoption of more participatory partisan practices. And finally, as Major Wilson and, more recently, Gerald Leonard have argued, Van Buren's defense of party retained many premodern, antiparty assumptions—such as the indivisibility of the “People”—and remained a far cry from the pluralism and interest-group liberalism Hofstadter and Silbey want to attribute to him (p. 26).[3]

Silbey's study also resembles many of its predecessors in the admiration and affection it betrays for its subject. Silbey rejects the notion that Van Buren owed his political successes to Machiavellian craftiness and “opportunism” (p. 219). Silbey is more impressed with the ideological consistency Van Buren displayed over his long career. Van Buren, to be sure, was capable of compromise and always characterized by moderation; but he never deviated from his “distrust of extensive national power” or his attachment to the “virtues of the negative state,” even when, during his Panic-plagued presidency, for example, it might have been in his immediate political interest to relent (p. 117). During the raucous 1840 presidential campaign, while his opponents beguiled the voting public with “Whig shenanigans” (p. 151), Van Buren and his followers countered with a sober “reitera-

tion and reinforcement of the main themes that defined the Van Buren democracy.” “Once more,” Silbey writes, “he demonstrated that the familiar charge of noncommittalism, and the persistent characterization of him as too adaptable ideologically in electoral situations, were both misplaced” (p. 152).

Silbey, to be sure, acknowledges that Van Buren had his faults. He forthrightly details, for example, Van Buren's doughface eagerness to appease the South on the issue of slavery (e.g., p. 132). And Van Buren's dalliance with Free Soilism in the 1840s is ascribed not to anti-slavery idealism, but to his belief that the “territories should, in his view, remain white” (p. 195). Silbey confesses that “Van Buren's vision and political orbit had serious limitations to them. Whatever its larger achievements, there were omissions, missteps, ambiguities, hesitations, and, yes, evasions” (p. 219).

On balance, however, Silbey's fondness for Van Buren drowns out such avowals of his limitations. Indeed, at times Silbey's admiration for Van Buren degenerates into special pleading, and, if his study has a weakness, it lies in its almost partisan affection for its subject. In places Silbey's book harkens back to the many fulsome campaign biographies written during Van Buren's lifetime. Silbey, for example, goes to great lengths to sustain Van Buren's portrayal of himself as a spotless Jeffersonian-Republican during his early career and an uncompromising enemy of Federalism. Silbey excuses Van Buren's opposition to James Madison and his support for DeWitt Clinton in the presidential election of 1812 as a reluctant “mark of his solidarity with his state's Republicans” (pp. 18), when in fact Van Buren's behavior was hardly so innocent. (Even Van Buren's campaign biographer, William Emmons, admitted that Van Buren was “prompted to this course by an impression, that the character and measures of the existing administration were not sufficiently decisive and energetic.”)[4]

Silbey similarly smooths over Van Buren's often inconsistent attitude towards Federalists after the war. Silbey defends Van Buren's eyebrow-raising friendship with the Federalist Rufus King, by attributing to Van Buren a rule by which he countenanced “High-Minded” Federalists who “had supported ‘Mr. Madison's War’” while continuing to oppose “destructive, antiwar Hartford convention Federalists” (p. 29). But Van Buren routinely ignored this distinction, as he did most notoriously in 1822, when he publicly opposed the appointment of the Federalist Solomon Van Rensselaer as an Albany postmaster. Far from being a Hartford Convention

Federalist, Van Rensselaer, though opposed to the declaration of war with Britain, patriotically served nevertheless, taking five bullets at the heroic assault on Queenstown in October of 1812. Like virtually all Republicans of his generation, Van Buren deviated from Jeffersonian orthodoxy and worked alongside Federalists when it was in his interest to do so, his professions to the contrary notwithstanding.

On these issues and elsewhere, Silbey reproduces arguments Van Buren and his followers employed to defend his record, while undermining and sometimes ignoring altogether the perspective of Van Buren's opponents.[5] This is nowhere more the case than in Silbey's handling of the Senate's rejection in January 1832 of Van Buren's appointment as minister to Britain. Silbey chalks up the incident to "the savagery of the political divisions at home" (p. 80), without mentioning the professed grounds upon which the Senate rejected the nomination. In 1829, Secretary of State Van Buren had instructed Minister to Britain Louis McLane to disavow the diplomatic policy of the Adams administration and to emphasize that Adams had been repudiated at the polls.[6] When made public, Van Buren's comments were widely decried as an unacceptable extension of domestic politics into the international arena and a sacrifice of the nation's honor for the sake of political bickering.

In sum, though Silbey is at times too generous towards his subject, he has written an enjoyable and engaging book, one that general readers and specialists alike can read with profit.

Notes

[1]. As he notes, three scholarly studies appeared in the early 1980s alone: John Niven, *Martin Van Buren: The Romantic Age of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Donald Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System* (Princeton: Prince-

ton University Press, 1984); and Major Wilson, *The Presidency of Martin Van Buren* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984).

[2]. Joel Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); idem, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). See also: Silbey, "Introduction" to *The American Party Battle: Election Campaign Pamphlets, 1828-1876* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); and idem, "'To One or Another of These Parties Every Man Belongs': The American Political Experience from Andrew Jackson to the Civil War," in *Contesting Democracy: Substance and Structure in American Political History, 1775-2000*, ed. Byron E. Shafer and Anthony J. Badger (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), pp. 65-92.

[3]. Major Wilson, "Republicanism and the Idea of Party in the Jacksonian Period," *Journal of the Early Republic* 8 (Winter 1988), pp. 419-442; and Gerald Leonard, *The Invention of Party Politics: Federalism, Popular Sovereignty, and Constitutional Development in Jacksonian Illinois* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[4]. William Emmons, *Biography of Martin Van Buren, Vice President of the United States* (Washington, 1835), p. 14.

[5]. It should be pointed out that Silbey is not everywhere guilty of this. For example, he generously lays out the case Whigs made against Van Buren in 1840 without attempting to detract from it (pp. 142-147).

[6]. Martin Van Buren, *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, 1920), pp. 530-31. According to Jackson, he and not Van Buren authored the instructions. See James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York, 1860), vol. 3, p. 376.

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