



The Presidency of Martin Van Buren (American Presidency (Univ of Kansas Hardcover))

Major L. Wilson

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Martin Van Buren, eighth president of the United States, has been judged harshly by some historians as a politician by trade and a spoilsman without principles, a "little magician" who was interested only in his own advancement. This volume provides a thorough recounting of the events and decisions of Van Buren's White House years (1837-1841), and adds to the positive reappraisal of Van Buren as an able statesman and effective chief executive. Wilson stresses that Van Buren faced the major problems of his presidency with courage and consistency, and that he brought repose to a nation wrenched both by sectional differences and by the violent fluctuations of economic expansion and contraction.

Wilson discusses Van Buren's close relationship with Andrew Jackson and substantially qualifies the persistent interpretation of the Van Buren presidency as the "third term" of Jackson. Van Buren, a pragmatic Jeffersonian with a statesmanlike concern for order, reversed Jackson's priorities. Wilson describes how Van Buren resolved the crisis with Mexico and succeeded in keeping peace with Britain at a time when incidents arising out of rebellion in Canada and the disputed Maine boundary might have precipitated war.

The most distinctive contribution of this volume is its in-depth analysis of the economic and political aspects of Van Buren's domestic policy, especially the Independent Treasury, the issue that gave basic shape to his entire presidency. Jackson had divorced the Treasury from the national bank; Van Buren took one further step and rendered the operations of the Treasury independent of the state banks as well. By the end of his term, debate on the issues of currency and enterprise had brought the second-party system in the U.S. to maturity. In 1840 Van Buren's views in this area would cost him reelection.

This study sheds lights on a turbulent period in American history and contributes to our understanding of Martin Van Buren's achievements. He kept the nation out of war, reduced sectional tensions, and established the basis for a fiscal policy which he believed would bring greater stability to economic development.

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