

From VOA Learning English, welcome to the Making of a Nation, our weekly program of American history for people learning American English. I'm Steve Ember.

Last time, we talked about Martin Van Buren. He was sworn in as the eighth president of the United States in 1837. Not long after he took office, the United States suffered an economic depression. It lasted six years.

The depression was the major problem during Van Buren's presidency, but not the only problem.

In foreign affairs, one of the chief problems Van Buren faced was a dispute with Britain about Canada. Canadian rebels had tried twice to end British rule over Canada. They failed both times.

Rebel leaders fled to safety in the United States. There they found it easy to get men and supplies to help them continue their struggle.

The rebels built a base on a Canadian island in the Niagara River which formed part of the border between the two countries.

The rebels used an American boat to carry supplies from the American side to their base. In December 1837, Canadian soldiers crossed the Niagara River and seized the boat. One American was killed in the fight.

For a while, Canadian forces and the rebels exchanged attacks. A number of American citizens assisted the rebels.

President Van Buren was troubled. He declared that the wish to help others become independent was a natural feeling among Americans. But he said no American had a right to invade a friendly country. He warned that citizens who fought against the Canadian government, and were captured, could expect no help from the United States.

Another problem between the United States and Canada at that time concerned the border along the American state of Maine. That part of the border had been in dispute ever since 1783. That was when Britain finally recognized the independence of the United States.

Years later, the king of the Netherlands agreed to decide the dispute. The king said it was impossible to decide the border from the words of the peace treaty between Britain and the United States. So he proposed what he believed was a fair settlement instead. The United States would get about twice as much of the disputed area as Canada.

Britain accepted the proposal. But the United States did not. The United States refused because the state of Maine would not accept it.

In 1838, Britain withdrew its acceptance of the proposal.

Canadians entered the disputed area. The governor of Maine sent state militia forces to the area. The soldiers drove out the Canadians and built forts. Canada, too, began to prepare for war.

President Van Buren sent General Winfield Scott to Maine. Scott was able to get the governor to withdraw his forces from the disputed area. He also received guarantees that Canadian forces would not enter the area. The danger of war passed.

Americans in the border area, however, were angry with President Van Buren. They believed he was weak because he did not want war.

The president was losing support not only in the Northeast. People all over the country were suffering because of the depression. Most people believed Van Buren was responsible for their troubles because he continued the hard money policies of former president Andrew Jackson.

Historian Joel Silbey is an expert on Martin Van Buren. He says most historians do not think Van Buren was a strong president. However, Joel Silbey says Van Buren left an important legacy.

“When it comes to the political system, he was a brilliant innovator.”

Martin Van Buren organized his political party, the group that came to be known as the Democrats. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, people who supported independent farmers and states’ rights over a central government generally followed Thomas Jefferson. They called themselves Democratic-Republicans or Jeffersonian Republicans.

Jeffersonian Republicans opposed the Federalist Party. They believed the Federalists wanted a strong national government, a powerful banking system and a small, elite social class.

But after Thomas Jefferson died, the Jeffersonian Republicans broke into factions. They divided their support among several candidates during presidential elections and, as a result, often lost.

Joel Silbey says one of the things Van Buren had learned was that, above all else, when you have an ideology you want to fight for you need unity.

Van Buren organized political clubs and political leaders in New York that all supported Jefferson's ideas. He brought them together to talk about their political beliefs and choose a single candidate for their party.

In 1828 election, Van Buren had expanded this organization. His insistence on political unity had helped elect Andrew Jackson. And his system of meetings eventually became the national conventions that political parties use today to officially nominate their candidates.

Van Buren also helped create the modern political campaign. In the 1820s, he noticed many state constitutions were lifting some of their voting restrictions. As a result, more people were allowed to vote.

Historian Joel Silbey says Van Buren wanted to bring these new voters into his political party.

“He borrowed from a couple minor parties the notion of popular campaigns, where you persuaded people through campaign rallies, speeches by prominent people, and on Election Day getting them out to vote by your organization’s agents.”

Joel Silbey explains that these techniques to persuade and mobilize voters were new to national politics. Now they are some of the major features of political campaigns.

Martin Van Buren’s political tactics earned him a few nicknames. Some called him “The Little Magician,” because he knew how to win elections.

Others called him “The Sly Fox of Kinderhook.” Kinderhook is the town in New York where Van Buren grew up. The term “sly fox” is not entirely positive. Joel Silbey says the nickname suggests that many people did not feel they could trust him.

“Van Buren is the first person to be seen as that — a manipulator. Unfairly, it was said he would do anything to win an election, and he had no real principles.”

However, Joel Silbey says Van Buren did what he thought was necessary to preserve Jefferson’s ideals.

election of 1840, Van Buren ran for a second term as president. This time his opponents used Van Buren's political skills against him. Joel Silbey says the Whigs used popular speeches and rallies to portray Van Buren as a failed president.

“During his re-election campaign in 1840, crowds of Whigs would chant, ‘Mattie Van is a used-up man!’ because he no longer had any power or effect on things.”

The Whigs also nominated a military hero they believed the people would love. He was General William Henry Harrison. Harrison had led an attack on Indians in the Indiana territory in 1811. Many people believed that the battle — at a place called Tippecanoe — was a great victory for Harrison.

Van Buren's party, the Democrats, spoke of the 67-year-old Harrison as an "old lady." They called him "Granny Harrison." One Democratic newspaper said the old man did not really want to be president. It said Harrison would be happier with a \$2,000 a year pension, a barrel of hard apple cider to drink and a log cabin to live in.

Hard apple cider was a popular drink among working men. And at that time a great many farmers still lived in log cabins – houses made of rough logs.

The Whigs were the party of bankers and businessmen. They saw a chance to use the Democrats' statement to their own gain. It gave them a way to present themselves as the party of the working man and the small farmer. "The statement is right!" they cried. "The Whig Party is the party of hard cider and log cabins."

The Whigs put up log cabins everywhere and offered free hard cider to everyone. They organized huge outdoor meetings for thousands, with food and drink for all. They held parades and marched with flags, bands and pictures of William Henry Harrison. Many campaign songs were written. These songs told of Harrison's bravery against the Indians. They told how he loved the hard and simple life of the common man -- even though he was really a Virginia aristocrat.

At the same time, the Whig campaign songs said Martin Van Buren lived like a king in the White House.

A Whig congressman charged that the White House had become a palace. He said Van Buren slept in the same kind of bed as the king of France and ate French food on gold and silver dishes.

The Democrats made their own claims. They said Harrison could not read or write. They said he would not pay people the money he owed them. And they charged that Harrison even sold white men into slavery.

Senator Henry Clay said the campaign was a struggle between log cabins and palaces, between hard cider and Champagne.

The state of Maine held elections in September of 1840. Voters in Maine elected a Whig, Edward Kent, as governor. They gave the state's electoral votes to Harrison, celebrated as the hero of Tippecanoe, and to his vice presidential candidate, John Tyler.

The election results produced a new song for the Whigs. "And have you heard the news from Maine, / And what old Maine can do? / She went hell-bent for Governor Kent, / And Tippecanoe and Tyler, too. "

One by one, the other states voted. The election was close in the popular vote. But Harrison received 234 electoral votes, compared to only 60 for Van Buren. And so William Henry Harrison became the ninth president of the United States.



I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us next time for the Making of a Nation — American history from VOA Learning English.