

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT



Many contemporaries intensely disliked Martin Van Buren. "Thus only can I reach the throne," says Vice President Van Buren in this cartoon from the 1830s. "No, Matty," responds his weary boss, President Andrew Jackson, "by the Eternal, you'll sink me with you."

The rejected Minister,
*As he can make him President,
 without first making him Vice-president.*
See N. A. S. 219. B. 1830.

*Vice Presidents
 As Candidates*

"The 'Van Buren Jinx': Vice Presidents Need Not Beware" by George Sirgiovanni, in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Winter 1988), Center for the Study of the Presidency, 208 East 75th St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

As George Bush continues his drive for the White House, he faces a barrier that has long seemed all but insurmountable: the "Van Buren jinx." The last sitting vice president to be elected chief executive was Martin Van Buren, who succeeded Andrew Jackson in 1836.

Sirgiovanni, a Rutgers historian, dismisses the jinx as a product of "happenstance, historical accident, and outdated political custom."

Consider the 34 men who were vice presidents between Van Buren and Bush. Nine of them in fact *became* president when the incumbent resigned or died. Five vice presidents died in office, each time leaving the position open. (Not until 1967 did the 25th Amendment allow a president to fill a vice-presidential vacancy.) Seven were not renominated when their presidents ran for another term. Two fell out of contention when their presidents were not re-elected. One (Spiro Agnew, 1973) resigned.

Thus, only 10 of the 34 were "eligible" to seek the presidency.

Four did not run. Among the six who did, early contenders were ill-

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starred. In 1860, James Buchanan's vice president, John Breckinridge, was nominated by *Southern* Democrats in a party split that enabled Abraham Lincoln to lead his Republicans to victory. Charles Fairbanks was so disliked by his boss, Theodore Roosevelt, that in 1908 TR swung the G.O.P. nomination to his secretary of war, William Howard Taft.

The vice presidents' fortunes, Sirgiovanni argues, began to change during the 1950s. Dwight Eisenhower's vice president, Richard Nixon, transformed the office. Meeting with heads of state and serving as acting president twice when Ike was ill, Nixon helped turn his "dead end job" into a "free pass to the fast track" for the Oval Office. It was only by narrow margins that Nixon in 1960 and Hubert Humphrey in 1968 were denied the presidency. Sirgiovanni expects Bush—or one of his successors as vice president—to lay "the ghost of Martin Van Buren" to rest soon.

Preserving Diversity

"The Politics of Cultural Diversity" by John Gray, in *Quadrant* (Nov. 1987), Box C344, Clarence Street Post Office, Sydney 2000, Australia.

How should government treat ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities?

Most of the world's liberal democratic states embrace "multiculturalism," policies designed to preserve and nourish such groups. But Gray, a fellow of Jesus College, Oxford, objects. These policies, he maintains, are "pernicious." They express "a racist conviction that minority cultures can never maintain themselves without paternalistic support."

English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–73), the founder of modern liberalism, had only contempt for ethnic minorities. A Frenchman who thought himself a "Breton" or a "Basque," he wrote, was a "half-savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit."

Successive generations of liberals shared Mill's contempt for minorities, and, however inadvertently, expressed their disdain in the government programs they designed to assist them. Typically, attempts at "social-engineering" ended up harming rather than helping. (Example: urban renewal, which in many countries replaced poor but healthy communities with lifeless slums.) And subsidies aimed at preserving traditional ethnic culture, Gray believes, encourage the mistaken notion that minorities cannot flourish without state support, spawning "cultural apartheid."

Governments, Gray contends, should not try to conserve *any* minority through subsidy or regulation. A withdrawal from attempts to create special "tax-funded institutional reservations" (such as public housing projects) for minorities would encourage diversity. For example, allowing parents to select—or set up—their own schools through tuition vouchers would help offset the "cultural homogeneity" of public education.

The underlying issue, writes Gray, is what role the state should play in modern life. He votes for classical liberalism—that of *The Federalist Papers*, whose 18th-century authors believed that the state should exist not to promote any group or ideology, but to keep the peace and leave "practitioners of diverse traditions" free to thrive, or fail. Only a *limited* government can ensure that a diverse society "is more than an idle dream."