CHRIS CILLIZZA: I often wonder -- because I'm a giant nerd -- what people like Van Buren would think of the modern process, particularly the 2016 election.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: That's Washington Post politics reporter Chris Cillizza. And why does he wonder what Martin Van Buren would think of the American political machine and party system today?

Well, because Martin Van Buren basically created the beast. I'm Lillian Cunningham, and this is the eighth episode of Presidential.

PRESIDENTIAL THEME MUSIC

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Here are the presidential vital stats for Martin Van Buren. He's born in Kinderhook, New York in 1782, and his family is Dutch. He's actually the only president we've had in all of American history so far who spoke English as his second language.

He comes from a modest family. His father owns a farm and a tavern. Taverns at the time, though, were the main places that people would gather to talk politics -- so, he's exposed to politics from a very early age and gets involved at the local level. Van Buren works his way up the political ranks from the local level to the state level to the national level. He eventually becomes the main strategist for Andrew Jackson's successful presidential run in 1828.

By Jackson's second term, Martin Van Buren is appointed vice president. When Jackson's time in office is up, Van Buren goes from being vice president to being elected president himself in 1836. But he serves one term, and it's a term that's not considered great. And he's not elected a second time.

Do people in politics circles think about Martin Van Buren today? Or he's really just off the radar for everyone?

CHRIS CILLIZZA: Lillian, I'd love to say, 'Yes we have a weekly Martin Van Buren reading of various Presidential podcast wapo.st/presidential
pieces that he’s written over his time in office. But the answer to that is no. I have a monthly trivia night called Politics and Pints in Washington, right by Capitol Hill. And Van Buren comes up once every three or four months, because he has several distinctions: First non-British subject [to be president]; only president to not speak English in the home; and the shortest of the presidents. So, to the extent he’s mentioned, it’s as an answer to a trivia question to try to stump people. But no, I don’t really think so.

I feel like he’s in the interregnum between the founding fathers and then, you know, the Lincolns of the world. It's so hard. You know, the the opposite of love is not hate -- it's indifference. That's sort of how Van Buren is treated by history. It’s like, he wasn’t a terrible president. He wasn’t a good president. He was an okay president, which is sort of the most damning judgment I think you can have.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, his presidency is not great, but he does have a lasting impact on American politics -- and that is as the father of the modern political machine and the central creator of the idea of national party politics.

So what do we mean by that? Well, here’s Barbara Bair from the Library of Congress to start explaining.

BARBARA BAIR: Van Buren can really be credited with having developed the modern political party system and a new way that presidents were elected to office. He's often called the ‘father of the two-party system’ and he was definitely one of the major founders of the Democratic Party. Also, he introduced modern systems of party politics, the political caucus, nominating conventions and the system of patronage, which Andrew Jackson would use in office.

And so one lesson from Van Buren is: How do you build a power base? He was a master of manipulating the electoral college and winning elections by what you do at the local level -- how you have voting and districts and so on. And, in that way, he was a political magician that is the forefather to this very, very statistical way that we engineer political campaigns today.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: OK, so how does all this come about? Well, remember how the 1824 election was crazy? This was where there were four candidates, all technically of the same party, and they split the vote. They’re basically divided along geographic lines: John Quincy Adams is from New England, William H. Crawford is from Georgia, Henry Clay is from Kentucky, Andrew Jackson is from Tennessee. And because the race is so tight, the decision ends up going to the House of Representatives, and they elect John Quincy Adams.

But this starts a huge uproar. Van Buren is a senator at the time who's part of the same party, and he realizes that having all these multiple candidates with different geographic allegiances has created a political mess. It's causing candidates who are supposed to be on the same side to fight over their sectional issues, like slavery.

Now remember that Van Buren, as we said, hailed from the world of New York politics. And there, he had headed up the Albany Regency, which was one of the first American political machines. It was basically a group of politicians in upstate New York who pulled the strings on local politics. So, now that Van Buren's in Congress and seeing firsthand the mess of the presidential election of 1824, he starts thinking about how to replicate the party organization techniques they used in New York, but on a national level -- so you don't have candidates from within the same party

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devouring each other.

I spoke with Mark Cheatham, who's a professor at Cumberland University, and who's also organizing a huge project to go through and then digitize and make available all of Martin Van Buren's papers.

MARK CHEATHAM: That's what happened in 1824 -- is that you have the National Republicans, who have four candidates who emerge from within that one party, who start to eat each other and to divide the party.

During the mid-1820s, Van Buren, based on his experience in New York politics, came to the conclusion that forming a national party and a national party system would actually be beneficial to helping tamp down the sectionalism that was emerging in the United States. There's a very famous letter that he writes to Richmond, Virginia newspaper editor Thomas A. Ritchie in 1827, in which Van Buren lays out his idea for creating this two-party system.

And essentially what he says is that he wants to create a party, as he puts it, between the planters of the South and the plain Republicans of the North. And he goes on to explain to Ritchie that the reason for this is that, because of slavery, and because of the sectionalism that was already expressing itself, that having national parties would help to bind Americans together and would help avoid that issue of sectionalism.

So, I think that's one of the important lessons -- Van Buren has a vision about national parties that he sees could help keep slavery from becoming an issue that could drive us apart.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: When Van Buren has this vision for a national party that would bind Northern and Southern voters, part of what it entails is that he thinks you need mechanisms for creating that support across the country for a single candidate. This means having nominating conventions, as Barbara mentioned, which we still have today.

Before the mid-1820s, what was happening was that groups of congressmen had essentially decided which candidate should run. So, part of what Van Buren does is push the idea that voters should be involved in this part of the process. They should get to help narrow down the field of candidates within a party by nominating a main candidate. This vision of his helped democratize the political process and, at least in theory, it helped voters from the same party but from different regions agree to ultimately support a single candidate. And this is really still the concept behind the Democratic and Republican conventions that we have, even in an election year like this.

MARK CHEATHAM: One of the other things that Van Buren does effectively between '24 and '28 is he starts to envision: How can he take what he learned in New York state politics, in terms of party organization, and translate that on the national level? So, starting at the grassroots level, having politicians and party leaders there organize voters. And then at a next level, at say the county level, you have politicians who help keep voters in line. I mean, at the state level and then eventually at the national level.

This is something that takes time to come to fruition, but it's a way that we think about politics today. And frankly it's the way that political parties are structured. You have a national party -- and at this point we have national party chairs -- who then try to work from the top down to convince
party members to support whomever the candidate is going to be for the presidency and for congressional seats and otherwise. And so that's the vision that Van Buren gives to U.S. politics that I think is still extremely important today.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So Van Buren is putting all of this into effect following that vicious, messy 1824 campaign. What he's doing is starting to build up a political engine for Andrew Jackson to run again in 1828.

MARK CHEATHAM: What Van Buren comes to understand between '24 and '28 is that he needs a candidate who he can put forward to excite voters, and Andrew Jackson is that person. And what Andrew Jackson realizes -- and the people in Tennessee who surround Jackson, what they realize -- is they need that national coalition that can offer [support].

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: And thus the Democratic Party is born. Though it's worth keeping in mind that the platforms have changed over time, so the Democratic Party then doesn't really correspond to the party of today.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: I'm going to let Chris Cillizza explain what's similar and different about the Democratic Party of yore.

CHRIS CILLIZZA: The animating belief that Van Buren had certainly of the power of the average person -- their need to play a role, their need to be listened to, their need to be fought for -- Democrats would certainly lay claim to that today. If you watch a Hillary Clinton or a Bernie Sanders speech, you will see them say: We understand what it is to struggle, we understand what it is to not be able to achieve your dreams and we are looking out for you more so than the Republican Party. So, full-stop, that is a strain that runs through all of those years.

What doesn't run through as much was: Van Buren -- if he had to describe himself -- would probably call himself a fan of limited government, which is something that is very common and you will hear a hundred times in a single Republican presidential debate these days.

So, there are similarities certainly. But what Van Buren would define in terms of the ideals or founding principles of the Democratic Party are not a fully overlapping concentric circle of what they are today. And so in creating the Democratic Party itself, Van Buren really established the framework that has underpinned modern American politics, and that's the idea that we have two big national parties -- Democrats and Republicans -- that each try to be as strong and unified as they can, so they can defeat each other rather than fighting within their own ranks.

Over time, this idea of 'we can't eat our own' continues to be up all the time. You're hearing it, even now, as it looks as though Hillary Clinton is going to take a significant lead over the next month or so in terms of delegates over Bernie Sanders. You're already hearing talk of, 'He needs to get out sooner rather than later, because he's hurting the party more broadly.' Now, the pushback is: Healthy debate on the issues is not hurting the party -- it is, in fact, making the party more healthy.

So it's a very fine line. Van Buren was clearly right about the idea that you cannot run four people with relatively similar views and split the vote four ways; and then allow one person, who has divergent views, a unified vote. You will lose.
LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Well, it seems like there's a lot to think about in terms of Van Buren today when you look at the Republican race too, right? This idea that, in many ways, the machine doesn't seem to quite be working.

CHRIS CILLIZZA: My guess is Van Buren, though a smart and a guy with considerable foresight, did not imagine the impact of Twitter on the modern campaign. But yeah, it's possible -- I don't want to say probable, but it's possible -- that you are seeing the dying out of machine/establishment politics in this election.

Now, the truth of the matter is machine politics have been fading for years and years and years. They still exist in a few very ethnic major cities in this country. Boston and Chicago are the two best examples. But, you know, there used to be a Frankfort, Kentucky machine, and a Boise Idaho. You know, there was a guy -- typically a white male -- who controlled these things. And the age of the Internet, the revolt within the Republican Party in terms of the Tea Party -- these things have all weakened that idea that there is a backroom laying-on of hands, and then that person winds up being the person.

Certainly Trump's willingness to thumb his nose at everything that Van Buren built -- in terms of the need for an organization, the need to play by sort of a set of rules, the need to, at some level, play nice with each other because you're all on the same team at the end of the day -- these are things that Trump not only doesn't ascribe to, but has made not ascribing to them a remarkably successful political brand.

Look, the establishment candidate in the Republican presidential race was Jeb Bush, right? This is someone whose father and brother were president of the United States. This is someone who raised $150,000,000 through a super PAC in the first six months of 2015. This is a person who -- 100 years ago, 200 years ago, 15 years ago, frankly -- would have been the Republican presidential nominee. I do think it speaks to the declining power of -- and I don't want to make establishment, machine and backroom all synonymous -- but the idea that there's a group of people who are able to tap you on the shoulder with a sword and say, 'You're the guy.' That was the great gift that Van Buren had, which was, at the time, you needed that touch on the shoulder, you needed the money that provided, the organization that provided. It was sort of like, 'This is the candidate. Get in line, you will vote for him.'

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: What do you think is an important question that we can be asking ourselves from taking the time to look back at him and what he's done for the country and left the country?

CHRIS CILLIZZA: Well, I mean I do think the thing that he has left -- and I'm not sure he even thought it would grow to what it has grown into -- is this idea of party unity, the need to be united, the need to speak as one voice, the power of machine politics, of establishment politics.

I don't think there's any bigger storyline in the 2016 election -- and we focus on Trump and rightly so, but look, Bernie Sanders's challenge to Hillary Clinton is also meaningful in this regard -- of the decline and fall of the two-party establishments. I think it is more rapid on the Republican side. Hillary Clinton remains a favorite and for the nomination and is quite clearly an establishment candidate. But this idea that he helped codify -- that if we unite together, we have considerable power to put the sorts of people we want in office -- doesn't feel relevant in this presidential election.
Social media, celebrity, the fusion of reality culture and political culture, have made it possible for the establishment to really fade, erode and be grasping for relevance at this point. You know, is that era ended after literally a 185-year run? That, to me, is I think the most relevant thing about Van Buren and his insights to where we are politically today.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Van Buren’s success orchestrating Jackson’s campaign, his loyalty and his ability to maneuver end up meaning that his political star is on the rise once Jackson is elected president in 1828.

By Jackson’s second term in office, he brings on Van Buren as his vice president. And just to give a little bit more background about Van Buren -- his wife has died by this point and he has four sons. He never remarries. He’s known for being something of a dandy. That’s the word that keeps coming up about him: dandy. He wears green velvet suits with yellow shirts. That’s one example of his dandy ways. And it turns out that he ended up dressing in this sort of high-fashion way pretty early in his career because he got feedback, while practicing law, that he needed to come off as more sophisticated and from less of a modest background.

Those of you who have listened to other episodes know that I typically ask historians on the podcast to describe what it would be like to go on a blind date with that president. And, I mean, I do that just as a way of getting a better sense of their personality. Well, you may also have noticed I haven’t run that question in this episode, and that’s because Mark and Barbara both gave me similar answers: that it’s really hard to get a sense of Martin Van Buren beyond just, you know, kind of the joke about the green suits.

BARBARA BAIR: I think it’s hard to see into the heart of Martin Van Buren. You know, he seems to be a pragmatist, the deal-maker. You know, ‘What is the expedient thing?’

MARK CHEATHAM: His personality is hard to peg. Biographers who’ve studied Van Buren talk about him, in his letters at least, being very closed. It’s hard to get a real sense of who he is and what he’s thinking, in terms of his inner world.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Do we get any sense of what’s driving him as he moves up the political ladder, especially as he orchestrates Jackson’s campaign and then becomes vice president during Jackson’s second term?

MARK CHEATHAM: Certainly, he is someone who enjoys politics. He enjoys the intrigue. He enjoys the thrill of victory in trying to figure out, when he loses -- which isn’t that often early in his career -- how to overcome that. So, I think that’s part of it -- his personal ambition. I think with all politicians, no matter what they say, all politicians want some form of power. And I think Van Buren wants that. And I think he wants that because he does have a vision.

Another interesting thing about Van Buren is that, because he doesn’t come from wealth, I think he possesses an ambition that you oftentimes find in politicians of this era, or any era -- those who want to be successful and who, frankly, work very hard at it.

The little magician nickname comes from his ability to make things happen politically behind the scenes. (It is something that later will become a negative nickname, because people see him as manipulating Andrew Jackson in particular.) And what comes about as a result of loyalty to
Jackson is that Jackson replaces John C. Calhoun on the 1832 ticket. And Van Buren becomes vice president in 1832. And there are people at the time, and even since then, who look at that and say, 'Yep, that's the little magician pulling his tricks.' I don't think Van Buren is that calculating, but certainly he probably realized that being on Jackson's good side was only going to help him in the future.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: His skill as a political operator pays off, both for the party and for him personally. Not only does it make him vice president; but when Jackson's two terms are over, Jackson goes out and supports Van Buren's run for the presidency. And Van Buren pretty easily wins. And yet, to a great extent, those traits that got Van Buren all the way up the ladder don't serve him as president. And we've seen this before with some of our earlier presidents as well. In Van Buren's case, this is partly because he doesn't have the out-front charisma that the office seems to require.

MARK CHEATHAM: He comes into office after Andrew Jackson, who's a big personality and has very decisive opinions about things. And Van Buren seems to almost wilt in the spotlight.

And I think that says something about political leadership. There are some people who can lead in the background -- there are people who can sort of move behind the scenes and make things happen. Once you put them at the forefront of things, however, that's not such an easy task to accomplish. I think we see that with Van Buren when he's president.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: That was Mark Cheatham, and here's Barbara Bair from the Library of Congress.

BARBARA BAIR: Andrew Jackson was a giant personality -- very charismatic.

And Martin Van Buren was literally a smaller man and didn't have the same kind of people skills, which seems a little remarkable, given what he had accomplished in the state of New York. He was a very, very good behind-the-scenes person, a political mechanic who could wield compromises, get people to do things that needed to be done, make deals. But he was not a strong leader in the way that Jackson had been. He also had very, very bad luck.

Sometimes we have presidents who do everything right to prepare to be president. Van Buren had been a member of Congress. He was very briefly the governor of New York. Very, very briefly. Then he had been in the cabinet. He'd been the vice president. If anybody was prepared to be president, it was Martin Van Buren.

But when he's actually faced with the presidency, basically all the dirt hit the fan from the Jackson administration, including the fact that in 1837 there was a major economic depression. I think of him in some ways like Lyndon Baines Johnson. Johnson, too, had been so prepared to be president. And then he was faced with certain crises in the presidency that deflected from what he had hoped he would be doing as the president. And so that was true for Van Buren, too.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Van Buren may have been dealt a bad hand by some of Jackson's decisions. But Van Buren was also not willing to compromise the party line to play a better hand. As president, he's in many ways still acting like a party strategist.

MARK CHEATHAM: He's not a very effective president, and part of the reason for that is because
he's not able to free himself and adapt and be flexible in a way that we expect presidents to be. He
tries to keep the party together by focusing on small government -- by focusing on limited
government intervention in the depression that struck in 1837.

So one of his failings, I think, is that he doesn't respond to the times. He's still focused on: How do I
keep the party together and help them support what I see as the vision for the United States?

And he doesn't seem cognizant of the fact that voters don't support some of his ideas. They want
immediate relief. They want something that will help, you know, give them jobs or give them food
on their table. And Van Buren doesn't seem to respond to that.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So there's the one part of his leadership failing as president that's about
charisma. But there's also this other part that's about the fact that he's still thinking in the same
way that animated him as a political operator. What's the party line? How do I make sure we
adhere to it? A president, though, needs more nuance and flexibility than that to succeed.

Here's Chris Cillizza.

CHRIS CILLIZZA: Orthodoxy is a great thing if you are running a national party. If you see either of
the national party chairs -- Republican or Democrat, at this point -- they will parrot the party line in
every circumstance possible, because that's their job.

When you get elected president, orthodoxy only gets you so far. The truth of the matter is -- both
within your own party, and as it relates to the other party -- someone who is a sort of predictable
adherent of party principle at all times isn't going to get anything done.

People don't think of themselves -- regular people don't think of themselves -- as Democrat or
Republican. They just live and they adhere to whatever principles make sense to them. They don't
see everything through a partisan lens.

As I was thinking about it, Bill Clinton comes to mind. I guess this is either a good or a bad thing
depending on how you view the world -- he went on to popularize the idea of triangulation, which
is: Use your own party's orthodoxies (which the members of the House and Senate in your party
tend to adhere to more strongly...They have to, they're more functionaries of the party than the
president is) -- use them as an example of what you're not doing, in order to present yourself as a
moderate, middle-of-the-road dealmaker. ‘Well, many in my party say fill in the blank, but I don't
agree with fill in the blank.’

Say what you will about Bill Clinton's presidency, he was able to accomplish things using an
approach like that because I think he understood what Van Buren was either not able to
understand or not able to execute, which is: Orthodoxy is all well and good up to a point, and that
point, I think, is the presidency. At that point --- sure, you have a D or an R after your name, but
you are the president of the entire country. And to get things done, you have to act like it.

There's a big difference between being the chairman or chairwoman of the Democratic National
Committee and being president of the United States. Their approaches are very different and their
results are very different. But Van Buren didn't seem to quite get that. And so he is still acting as
the political party operator. And he kind of just dutifully keeps to the Jacksonian agenda.
BARBARA BAIR: One of those agendas was Indian removal. We often disparage Andrew Jackson for his genocide towards Indians, and particularly for the Trail of Tears. But the Trail of Tears actually happened under Van Buren’s presidency, not under Andrew Jackson. And they basically were death marches that started in May of 1838. People died of disease and overcrowding, of hunger. And many people died in either very hot or very cold weather of exposure. Ultimately, about a quarter of the people that were moved on what became known as the Trail of Tears died -- about 4000 Cherokees.

So it’s a terrible and tragic thing, and it wasn’t just the Cherokees. And Van Buren spent time on it in this annual address at the end of that very year, where this had all happened in 1838. This is one of the documents that we have in our Van Buren collection, here at the Library of Congress. He talks about many issues. It’s a long address. So I'm just reading the part about Indians.

'It affords me sincere pleasure to be able to apprise you of the entire removal of the Cherokee Nation of Indians to their new homes west of the Mississippi. The measures authorized by Congress at its last session, with a view to the longstanding controversy with them, have had the happiest effects, by an agreement concluded with them by the commanding general in that country who has performed the duties assigned to him on this occasion with commendable energy and humanity. Their removal has been principally under the conduct of their own chiefs, and they have emigrated without any apparent reluctance.'

And he goes on for quite a while about the history of Indian policy, and he is clearly positioning himself with it. Again, he's just a political operator who is carrying out longterm policies that have been formed by every president of the United States before him. So you don't hear remorse. You get a very happy gloss on the Trail of Tears. It's almost remarkable that he could have made this kind of speech. To me, you know, Van Buren failed as a president in a couple key instances. And Cherokee removal in 1838 is one of them, and the other one was also racially based. And that was the Amistad case.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: We talked about the Amistad case in our John Quincy Adams episode. This was where Africans staged a mutiny aboard the slave ship Amistad. This happens while Van Buren is in office, and the case goes to the Supreme Court, and it's pretty clear that Van Buren sides with the idea that they should be found guilty and denied their freedom.

BARBARA BAIR: I think it’s another instance where he's maintaining the status quo. He's maintaining slavery. He's maintaining Indian removal. He maintains the policies of Jackson on the bank. But in his viewpoint, this was what was best for the United States.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: On at least some of these issues, particularly the economic crisis, the American public doesn't really agree with his approach. And Van Buren fails to get himself re-elected for a second term as president.

MARK CHEATHAM: Despite all this political organization that he does during the 1820s to form the Democratic Party, in the 1840 election, he doesn't really take advantage of that.

His opponent, William Henry Harrison, goes out and gives speeches. The Whigs use all kinds of popular electioneering techniques, like distributing alcohol and having rallies and, you know, writing political songs and singing them at rallies.
And Van Buren is very passive during the election. And, to me, that's one of the conundrums about him. What is he thinking? I mean, he is the one who really laid the groundwork for this type of popular campaigning. Yet, he doesn't involve himself in it in 1840. And that's one of those unresolved questions.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Part of why historians don't quite have the answer to that is that Van Buren purposely destroyed many of his personal letters during his lifetime. And to this day, no one knows why.

MARK CHEATHAM: You know, the question is why did he do that? You know, that's what historians love -- is that mystery. Why does he do it?

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Interestingly too, after losing the election, Van Buren does run again in 1844. And he finally starts to express views that don't quite adhere to the Democratic Party line. Most notably, he's against the idea of immediately bringing Texas into the Union because it's a slave state, or it would be a slave state.

The difference of opinion between Van Buren and Jackson on this issue of slavery is what causes Jackson to give his support for the Democratic nomination to James Polk instead of Van Buren in 1844. This is despite Van Buren's longtime loyalty to Jackson. By 1848, Van Buren's antislavery views have grown stronger. And, in a twist that you probably didn't see coming, he leaves the Democratic Party that he did so much to create.

He launches one more unsuccessful bid for the presidency, and he represents a splinter group called the Free Soil Party. This is the exact type of splintering that he has worked -- for all of his career leading up to this -- to prevent.

But from that vantage point outside the Democratic Party, he gets a real view of the strength of the machine he created. His splinter group is far from powerful enough to win against that party establishment. And so without the machine support, Van Buren's political career is essentially over. And with that, the Little Magician disappears from the political stage.