"The Long Agony is Nearly Over": Samuel D. Ingham Reports on the Dissolution of Andrew Jackson's First Cabinet

Although little remembered today, Samuel Delucenna Ingham of Pennsylvania played an important role in state and national politics during the first third of the nineteenth century. Born in Bucks County in 1779, he received a classical education and entered business at an early age. A successful paper manufacturer, he soon turned to politics. He served as a member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, Justice of the Peace, Prothonotary of the Court of Common Pleas of Bucks County, Secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and member of the United States House of Representatives. Then, in March, 1829, President Andrew Jackson appointed him Secretary of the Treasury. This appointment to Jackson's Cabinet proved disastrous. Ingham's political career was to be destroyed—a casualty of the Eaton Affair.


2 There is no completely adequate account of the Eaton Affair, the Jackson-Calhoun quarrel with which it merged, and the dissolution of Andrew Jackson's first Cabinet. The secondary literature and the contemporary sources are all biased. The following brief summary is based on Royce C. McCrary, Jr., "John Macpherson Berrien of Georgia (1781-1856): A Political Biography" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, 1971), 172-182, which is heavily documented. The best accounts in print are John Spencer Bassett, The Life of Andrew Jackson (New York, 1931), 458-474, 497-544; Charles M. Wiltse, John C.
Mrs. John H. Eaton, the wife of Jackson's close friend and Secretary of War, was born Margaret O'Neale, the daughter of a popular Washington innkeeper. She grew into a strikingly pretty, vivacious, and self-assertive girl, much flattered by the politicians who flocked to her father's inn. An early marriage to a drunken Navy purser, John B. Timberlake, was unhappy; and throughout the 1820s gossip linked Mrs. Timberlake with Eaton, who was then a Senator from Tennessee and a boarder at O'Neale's tavern. A wealthy widower, Eaton paid O'Neale's debts and secured Timberlake a lucrative and distant post with the Mediterranean squadron. In 1828 Timberlake died, reputedly by his own hand, in North Africa. With what was regarded as indecent haste, Eaton and Mrs. Timberlake were married on January 1, 1829.

Mrs. Ingham, Mrs. John C. Calhoun, the wife of the Vice-President, Mrs. John Branch, the wife of the Secretary of the Navy, Mrs. Andrew J. Donelson, the hostess of the White House and wife of Jackson's private secretary, and the daughters of widowed Attorney General John Macpherson Berrien snubbed the Secretary of War's wife. Most of Washington society followed their examples. On the other hand, Mrs. Eaton had her supporters. Secretary of State Martin Van Buren, a widower, Postmaster General William T. Barry, whose family was in Kentucky, and Sir Charles Vaughan, the British Minister and a widower, went out of their way to be nice to her. Mrs. Eaton's most important supporter was President Jackson. Truly chivalrous in his own way, Jackson would not desert a friend and his wife because of slanderous rumors. Besides, in defending Mrs. Eaton, he was defending his own beloved Rachel, who had been hounded to her death in 1828 by vicious personal attacks.

For two years Jackson insisted, with very limited success, that Washington accept Mrs. Eaton. With the assistance perhaps of Van Buren, he came to believe that Calhoun was behind the attacks.

Calhoun: Nullifier, 1829-1839 (New York, 1968), 11-109; and Marquis James, The Life of Andrew Jackson (Indianapolis, 1938), 490-492, 495, 508-519, 531-543, 547-548, 551-552, 567-580. Bassett is judicious but inaccurate, James is pro-Jackson, and Wiltse is pro-Calhoun.
on his favorite. The “Eaton Malaria” thus merged with the Jackson-Calhoun quarrel, which went back to 1818 and the Seminole War. This ancient feud, the Eaton Affair, disagreements over policy and the desire to have Van Buren succeed him turned Jackson into Calhoun’s implacable foe. By February, 1831, the President and Vice-President of the United States were open enemies.

With Calhoun in opposition, Van Buren decided to purge the Carolinian’s followers from the Cabinet. Ingham had always been Calhoun’s partisan; Branch had moved into his camp; and Berrien, as one of Van Buren’s cronies remarked, had no particular friends and might as well be gotten rid of too. Eaton had also become a real embarrassment and had to be dismissed. To accomplish his purge, Van Buren devised the cleverest coup of his life in March and April of 1831. He persuaded Eaton that they both should resign, thus providing Jackson with an excuse for reorganizing his entire Cabinet. Van Buren would be appointed Minister to Great Britain and would be recognized as Jackson’s heir in 1836; Senator Hugh L. White of Tennessee would replace Eaton as Secretary of War; and Eaton would take White’s Senate seat. With a sincere or feigned reluctance, Jackson agreed to the scheme.

In April Van Buren partially implemented his plan. He and Eaton submitted their resignations. Ingham and Branch followed suit upon the President’s request. Berrien did not resign until June and Barry remained in the Cabinet. All members of the Cabinet retained office until replacements were found. The Senate refused to confirm Van Buren’s appointment as Minister to Britain and White declined to resign from that body. Although his statagem was not totally successful, Van Buren achieved his main objectives. He was recognized as Jackson’s successor, Calhoun was isolated, and the connection of the embarrassing Eatons with the Executive was terminated.

The President and the Secretary of the Treasury seemed to part on friendly terms. The latter’s resignation was politely worded and Jackson praised Ingham’s performance of his duties. This friendly relationship was, however, very fragile. Ingham’s resignation and Jackson’s acceptance of that resignation were contradictory. Ingham listed Jackson’s request as the sole cause of his resignation; the
President stated he was forced to accept Ingham's resignation because of disharmony in the Cabinet. Their correspondence was published and the grounds for a bitter quarrel were laid.

In May Ingham and Branch publicly refuted the Jacksonian version of the Cabinet dissolution and hinted that their refusal to receive Mrs. Eaton was the only reason for their dismissal. The following month, in much less veiled language, Duff Green's *United States Telegraph* blamed the Cabinet reorganization on Mrs. Eaton and Jackson's desire to regulate the private lives of his ministers.

Infuriated by the placing of his wife's name before the public, Eaton accused Ingham of inspiring the *Telegraph*'s "abusive slanders" and demanded his disavowal of them. Ingham mocked Eaton's "blustering" and endorsed the *Telegraph*'s position. Eaton met the mockery with a challenge, which was contemptuously dismissed. The former Secretary of War and a band of armed cronies then drove the former Secretary of the Treasury from Washington.

After his return to Pennsylvania, Ingham limited his activities to business. He engaged in the development of coal fields, canals, and banks. In 1849 he moved to Trenton, New Jersey, where he died in 1860. He left behind whatever political ambitions he might once have had when he fled Washington in the dead of the night with an enraged Eaton at his heels.

When the Cabinet dissolution began in April, 1831, Attorney General Berrien was in Georgia, negotiating with the Cherokees for Jackson. Between April 19 and May 9, 1831, Ingham wrote Berrien six confidential letters, depicting in great frankness the events in Washington. These hitherto unpublished letters afford fascinating glimpses of one of the most dramatic periods in American history. They are printed below in their entirety.

The originals of the accompanying letters are in the John Macpherson Berrien Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library. The letters are published with the permission of the Southern Historical Collection. Essential corrections and additions are enclosed by brackets. Ingham's script is nearly illegible and several possibly disputable words have been indicated by bracketed question marks.
My dear Sir

The long agony is nearly over, Mr. V. B. & Major Eaton have resigned, and their resignations were accepted, of which successive notices were given to Gov. Branch & myself today. No intimation was given to me that I was expected to do the same, but from what we know thro other movements there can be no doubt on this point, I had supposed from the response of the President that you were not to be included, but Branch had a more free conversation & he says that the "reorganization" will extend to all but Barry, who is excepted "because he is under charges and because he is not a member of the cabinet"! Mr Livingston is to be Secy of State, Mr V. B. to go to England, Judge White secy of War; Secy of the Navy & Attorney Gen not fixed on perhaps Kendal & Forsyth!

I will go cheerily out. You know how I dislike suspense.

Your family are well, so said your son whom I met in the street today

Sincerely yours, S D Ingham

Washington 20 April 31

My dear Sir

I wrote you a few lines yesterday by way of Milledgeville, but your daughter whom I had the pleasure of seeing last evening at

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3 This letter is postmarked April 26 but it is obviously the letter of April 19 referred to by Ingham in his letter of April 20.

4 Eaton's resignation, dated April 7, and Van Buren's resignation, dated April 9, are published in John Spencer Bassett, ed., Correspondence of Andrew Jackson (Washington, D.C., 1926-1935), IV, 257-258, 260-262.

5 Jackson's acceptance of Eaton's resignation, dated April 8, and his acceptance of Van Buren's resignation, dated April 12, are in ibid., 258, 262-263.

6 A brief memorandum by Jackson, dated April 18, of his meetings with Ingham and Branch is in ibid., 264.

7 Congress was at this time investigating misuse of funds in the Post Office Department.

8 The Postmaster General had first been given Cabinet rank by Jackson in March, 1829.

9 Edward Livingston, a Jacksonian Senator from Louisiana, did succeed Van Buren as Secretary of State.

10 Amos Kendall of Kentucky, Jackson's Fourth Auditor of the Treasury. Levi Woodbury, a Jacksonian Senator from New Hampshire, actually succeeded Branch as Secretary of the Navy. Kendall did, however, become Postmaster General in 1835.

11 John Forsyth, a Jacksonian Senator from Georgia. Roger Brooks Taney, the Attorney General of Maryland, succeeded Berrien as United States Attorney General, but Forsyth became Secretary of State in 1834.

12 William Davies Berrien.

13 Margaret Lydia Berrien.
Miss Branch's wedding\textsuperscript{14} told me you would be in Savannah by the
25. I therefore send you another epistle to give you the news. Mr
V Buren and Major Eaton sent in their resignations on the 18th.
Gov. Branch & I recd the first intimation of this from the President
on the same day at separate interviews. The Pt merely communica-
ted the fact to me without supporting any definite objection or
giving the slightest intimation which could be understood as an
invitation to me to follow their example, unless that could be
inferred from his answer. as I was bent upon having a distinct
intimation, I attempted to draw him out but in vain, except so far
as to view Mr V. B's letter, which places his resignation on the
ground of preserving Gen. Jackson from the effects of an erroneously
unjust purpose[?] i.e. popular delusion [or] on his part [Van Buren's]
adding to that impression. After I left the President, I wrote him a
note\textsuperscript{15} requesting to be informed as to the particular matter which
he had intended to propose for my reflection. In answer to this I
was invited to another interview\textsuperscript{16} the next day where he informed
me that as Mr V B & E. had resigned it became necessary to re-
organize his cabinet and he could not in justice to them permit
them to retire and retain the rest[.] The conversation was short, I
only said that as none of the reasons offered by Mr V B & E. applied
to me, I could not for their reasons retire, but I desired no other
than a distinct intimation of his wish, and I would therefore prepare
a note of resignation & send it immediately. He expressed a wish
that I would consent to remain in the office until he would have
time to reorganize &c and that I would give my letter of resignation
that form[.] This was the only part of the transaction which pre-
presented the least difficulty, but after mature reflection and consulting
one or two intimate friends I adopted that course, but in my note\textsuperscript{17}
I have taken care to place the resignation solely on the ground of
his wish, which I have taken particular care to keep distinct from
the reasons which induced that of Mr V B & E. Gov. B. placed his

\textsuperscript{14} On Apr. 19, 1831, Rebecca B. Branch, the daughter of the Secretary of the Navy, mar-
mied R. W. Williams.

\textsuperscript{15} This note, dated April 18, is in Bassett, ed., \textit{Jackson Correspondence}, IV, 263–264.

\textsuperscript{16} A brief undated note by Jackson of this interview is in \textit{ibid.}, 264.

\textsuperscript{17} Ingham's resignation, dated April 19, is in \textit{ibid.}, 264–265.
on the same ground 18 but he was not so well fortified as I was, and he rec'd a letter 19 in answer to his note excepting to that part of it as a misapprehension. There is an issue between them which the learned must stay. I haven't rec'd an answer to my note. We are all well and Mrs. I 20 is in high spirits, occasioned as I tell her by the appearance of such good company in the retreat from the metropolis[,] I had almost forgotten to tell you what is perhaps most interesting, Mr Barry is to remain. Because 1. He is not a regular member of the Cabinet 2 that he is under charges of official misconduct. Nothing was said to me but this to indicate that the Atty Gen was to be "reorganized" (this is the word), but with Gov. Branch he was more explicit and indicated the intention to include you in the operation. Mr Livingston is to be Sec of State, Judge White Secy of War if he will accept. Mr McLane 21 Secy Tresy and I can think of none for the Navy & Atty Gen but Kendal & Forsyth! We had a gay party at the wedding last night and the great state secret which was to be announced in the papers this morning 22 was spread over the city before night[.] The President & Mr V. B. were present at the Ceremony but every one saw they resembled funeral guests rather than wedding guests, we were all very lively and your excellent daughter seemed to be quite cheered with the prospect of your return to be[ing] a private[?] Georgian[.]

Accept our best respects,
Your sincere friend
S. D. Ingham

Hon John McPherson Berrien

My dear Sir

By way of supplement to the newspapers I send you such matter as may seem most worthy of notice in this awful crisis. Since I

18 Branch's resignation, dated April 19, is in ibid., 266.
19 Jackson's reply to Branch's resignation, also dated April 19, is in ibid.
20 Mrs. Ingham.
21 Louis McLane of Delaware, Jackson's Minister to Great Britain, succeeded Ingham as Secretary of the Treasury.
22 The announcement of the four resignations was first published in the Administration organ, Frank Blair's Washington Globe, Dec. 20, 1831.
wrote you yesterday, I have had the President’s answer to my note of resignation. It is verbatim with Gov. Branch’s (such as it be) the approbation of our public conduct is given in the terms which you who know the man will not be surprised at. I quote a passage for your own information as I have not learned that any communication has been made to you tho I cannot doubt the fact.

“When the resignations of the Secretary of State & Secy of War were tendered, I considered fully the reasons offered and all the circumstances connected with the subject. After mature deliberation I concluded to accept those resignations. But when this conclusion was come to, it was accompanied with a conviction that I must entirely renew my Cabinet. The members had been invited by me to the stations they occupied. It had come together in great harmony as a unit. Under these circumstances in which I found myself, I could not but perceive the propriety of selecting a Cabinet composed of entirely new material, as being calculated in this respect at least, to command public confidence and satisfy public opinion. Neither could I be insensible to the fact that to permit two only to retire would be to afford room for unjust newspaper notices and malignant misrepresentations concerning the influence of their particular presence upon the conduct of public affairs. Justice to the two characters whose public spirit had impelled them to tender their resignations also required then, in my opinion, the decision which I have made however painful to my own feelings it became necessary that I should promptly make known to you my view of the whole subject.”

In accepting of yr resignation it is with great pleasure that I bear testimony to the integrity and zeal with which you have managed the fiscal concerns of the nation. In your discharge of all the duties of your office over which I have any control I have been fully satisfied and in your retirement you carry with you my best wishes for your prosperity and happiness. It is expected that you will continue to discharge the duties of your office until a successor is appointed.” I must close for want of time with out

23 Jackson’s copy of his acceptance of Ingham’s resignation, dated April 20, is printed in Bassett, ed., *Jackson Correspondence*, IV, 268. It varies significantly from the version quoted here by Ingham. Presumably Jackson’s copy was a first draft that he changed in the final draft.
remark, except to say that the correspondence between Mr V. B. &
the President is considered as a nomination of Mr. V. B. for the
succession

Sincerely yours
S D Ingham

Hon John Berrien
Washington 21 April 1831

Washington 4 May 31

My dear Sir

I have this moment recd your favor of the 27th, and hasten to
reply in a few lines before the mail closes. I wd have written to you
oftime but did not know where you might be. I think you do well
in waiting for the movement, you ought I think to compel them to
make their own movement, being under no obligation to relieve
them from their embarrasment which is very great at every step,²⁴
my letter put the council into a rage and the Globe is now trying to
place the movement on the ground of a voluntary resignation in the
face of the proof to the contrary.²⁵ The general impression among
the quid nunc run²⁶ is that no movement is intended against you.
This arises from the declaration of the President that all is to be
voluntary, (as well I suppose as all that has been)[.] I wd have been
however somewhat disposed to have believed that some change had
taken place in that respect as to yourself, but for the fact that
Donelson’s return has been countermanded²⁷ as appears by a letter
from him rd yesterday. The plan I think is therefore to have no
body about the Govt & neither in his [Jackson’s] favor who is not
decidedly for V. B. & Mrs E and expressly hostile to Mr. Calhoun.
These are speculations however, all is captious and the Pt is the

²⁴ Berrien took Ingham’s advice and forced Jackson to ask for his resignation.
²⁵ See, for instance, the Globe, Apr. 30, 1831.
²⁶ Quid Nunc Run. Who now Crowd; the “In Crowd.”
²⁷ The Donelsons had been banished from Washington for not accepting Mrs. Eaton. The
rumor had spread that they would be allowed to return, leading to the assumption that
Jackson would tolerate some opposed to Mrs. Eaton. The fact that he countermanded their
return proved this assumption incorrect. The Donelsons were allowed to return in September,
1831, after the Eatons left Washington.
most unhappy man in the city except perhaps [illegible] I have greatly wished for your advice but having had but little aid of this kind, Branch & myself have determined to maintain the ground we have taken and throw upon the Pt & his advisors the burden of making explanations to the Nation. We go together & say that every thing which has led to this event now belongs to the historian & [is] wholly to be known by the people now in the hope they may in the future be able to remove the evils which may be found to have existed. I trust you will not refuse to remain[.] You have been for a long time working for the country almost as if [you] were un-connected with the feeling[?] of the Chief Magistrate & you can feel no delicacy in continuing, it will increase their difficulty of giving answer to the people but that will not be your concern. I write this in haste as you know. Our families are well. God bless you. I may remain here a month or so yet. Woodbury has accepted[.] I expect he is coming on soon[.] White is deliberating but he will probably accept. L——n\(^28\) is to be here this week. Mr V. B. complains heavily of his losses (pecuniary). We all except Branch dined at the Pts yesterday with the Department heads & I had fine spirits, the Pt constantly napping & V. B. complaining of dyspepsia & etc

yours sincerely
SD Ingham

Hon JMc Berrien

Washington 7 May 31

My dear Sir

I have this moment recd your esteemed favor of the 30th and had intended before to have written you by this mail[.] The time for closing the mail is so near at hand that you must excuse a short letter. I do not think that any of your friends here entertain the opinion that you are called upon by any sensibility as to yourself to make any movement. of this opinion elsewhere you can best judge. For you to move would be to relieve the “best friends of the President” (as the Globe says) who have advised this measure from a part of the embarrassment they now feel. I wd therefore incline to let as much of it rest upon them as properly belongs to them.

\(^{28}\) Livingston.
Gov B. had a conversation with the Pt 2 days since in which he asked him directly if he did not intend to retain you, he replied no. That the reorganization must embrace the whole, he was then asked if he had written, he said no. That he would not write but await your return to communicate the matter as he had done to us!! This conversation was distinct and explicit, he added that he did not know whether Judge Barbour would accept &c.

Donelsons return has been countermanded and I am persuaded that the objects nearest his [Jackson's] heart are 1. his reelection 2. to avenge Mrs. E. 3. to destroy Mr. Calhoun 4. to have Mr V. B. for a successor, whether I have placed them in the right order may be doubted, and I wd not be surprised if he [Jackson] would empty Washington of all who have not made their wives submit to the lady.

My course is to avoid all appearance of passion, to let the explanations be drawn out of those who have addressed & executed the "General Movement". I dined with the Pt & diplomatic corps on Tuesday last, I was in good spirits & had even found it pleasant[?] to see the old chief napping constantly & finally sinking his eyes on his plate for an hour. Mr V. B. had a sad fit of Dyspepsia, I tried to cheer him up and encourage his appetite, but the viands did not relieve. L—which is Secretary, expected the 15th. I shall probably remain until your return to finish off my labors on weights & measures so far as to prevent it from going back when I leave All well[.] I give myself here to July. Branch about the same time. Very sincerely Yours S. D. Ingham

McLane is absent

[May 9, 1831]

My dear Sir

That you may be acquainted with all our movements I seize a moment to tell you that Gov. Branch has written a letter which

29 Judge Philip P. Barbour of Virginia was tended the office of Attorney General but refused it.
30 This is the May 3 dinner referred to in Ingham's letter of May 4.
31 Ingham never finished his report on weights and measures.
32 This letter is undated. It is postmarked May 9.
33 Branch's letter, dated May 3, was published in the Raleigh, N. C. Star, May 11, 1831.
he expects will be published, that I regret very much. he presented it to me but consented to modify by striking out all the digressive & exculpatory matter ending with referring his friends to the Pt. &c[?] for the causes but after he left me he was seduced by the pleasure of venting a little feeling into a publication of the whole, which I was not aware of till yesterday. In the mean time in order to remove an impression which I thought was doing us some injury and leaving the discord to be traced to other causes and effects than in the public operations of the Govt, I have denied the existence of any difficulties which had for a moment interrupted the official intercourse of the heads of Depts as influenced the Cabinet's deliberations by making the discussion as it is now[.]34

Branchs letter virtually admits discord and "malign influence." You will soon see both in the papers[.] I estimate this explanation will not be able to account[.]

You have nearly escaped the ludicrous caricatures which the wags are amusing themselves with all over the U. S. at our expense.35 Some of which could not fail to make you laugh especially as your own face is not quite discernible[.] My plan is to remain quiet at present, only point36

Yours truly
Sincerely
In haste
S D Ingham

34 Ingham's statement, dated May 6, was published in the Philadelphia American Sentinel, May 25 1831.
35 An example of such a caricature, which did not include Berrien, is reproduced in Quenna Pollack, Peggy Eaton: Democracy's Mistress (New York, 1931), following 131.
36 That is, only indicate the true story of what happened.