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## Tech Bytes - Tid Bits in Tech News: Endangering Life and Limb...At Breakneck Speed

In 1829, New York Governor Martin Van Buren wrote to President Andrew Jackson about the threat posed by a new technology. When we read the correspondence today, Van Buren's plea for regulatory barriers to protect the status quo provides a striking example of how industries turn to the government when threatened by superior technologies. The letter gives little forethought to the effect this policy would have on consumers.

Van Buren, like many of today's public officials, failed to see the tremendous benefits that would accrue to the citizens of his state as well as consumers around the world by allowing the market to work unimpeded by regulatory constraints. Today, any number of innovations in the communications marketplace are withheld from consumers by the same type of regulatory blinders.

History and the letter below teach a very plain lesson. Government officials should not pick which technologies succeed or fail.

Dear Mr. President:

The canal system of this country is being threatened by the spread of a new form of transportation known as 'railroads.' The federal government must preserve the canal boats for the following reasons:

One – If canal boats are supplanted by railroads, serious unemployment will result, captains, cooks, drivers, hostlers, repairmen and lock tenders will be left without means of livelihood, not to mention the numerous farmers now employed in growing hay for horses.

Two – Boat builders would suffer and towline, whip and harness makers would be left destitute.

Three – Canal boats are absolutely essential in the defense of the United States. In event of the expected trouble with England, the Erie Canal would be the only means by which we could ever move the supplies so vital to waging modern war.

For the above mentioned reasons, the government should create an Interstate Commerce Commission to protect the American people from the evils of 'railroads' and to preserve the canals for prosperity.

As you may well know, Mr. President, 'railroad' carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of 15 miles per hour by 'engines,' which in addition to endangering life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside, setting fire to the crops, scaring the livestock and frightening women and children. The Almighty

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certainly never intended that people should travel at such a breakneck speed.

Respectfully yours,

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#### READER COMMENTS

Chris Snyder from Dallas, TC  
2004-07-22

"Ditto Colorado. Just because someone else has used an Urban Legend, doesn't make it "more" real. It's a fake and should be researched."

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A reader from Denver, CO  
2004-05-20

"The article could be better if it did not use the VanBuren letter as an argument. Several items about the letter clearly point to the fact that it is not authentic -- -- The letter is dated January 31, 1829. Jackson was not yet inaugurated president on that date (therefore VanBuren would never have referred to him as "Mr. President"). -- The first railroads did not begin until 1832. -- The memo form of address using "To:" was not in general use during that time, and especially not when addressed to a president. -- Words such as "unemployment" and "repairmen" were not used during that time. -- There is no evidence that the canal system was ever considered as a method of national defense. In fact, the term "canal system" was never used during that time because canals had not been developed into a system. -- Horses can and did r"

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