

Monroe Doctrine

The Monroe Doctrine was first set out in a speech by President James Monroe on December 2, 1823. The ideas are grounded in much earlier thinking, such as the "Farewell Address" of George Washington, in which he inveighed against close political association with European states, and in the first inaugural address of Thomas Jefferson. The idea of an exceptional status for the United States and for the Western Hemisphere had been launched before Monroe's address to Congress.

By 1822, only Bolivia remained as a Spanish colony in Latin America. All the others had declared independence. In the Caribbean, however, several islands remained under Spanish control, most notably Cuba and Puerto Rico. When European war clouds appeared in April 1823, the United States feared that Spain's Caribbean colonies might be ceded to either France or Britain, which was a disturbing prospect.

Secretary of State John Quincy Adams sent a letter to Hugh Nelson, the American minister to Spain, outlining his concerns:

Such indeed are, between the interests of that island and of this country, the geographical, commercial, moral, and political relations, formed by nature, gathering in the process of time, and even now verging to maturity, that in looking forward to the probable course of events for the short period of half a century, it is scarcely possible to resist the conviction that the annexation of Cuba to our federal republic will be indispensable to the continuance and integrity of the Union itself.

At the same time, American interests in the northwest part of North America were becoming of more concern. Both the United States and Britain had explored from the south, while Russia had explored the Alaska coast and was looking to the south. In July, 1823, Adams made his concerns known to Russian minister in Washington.

When France crossed the Pyrenees to help put down a rebellion against the Spanish monarch, Britain worried that this might lead to a joint French-Spanish expedition to retake the Latin American colonies for Spain. The British foreign minister George Canning communicated with the American minister in London, Richard Rush, and suggested that a joint declaration opposing such a development would serve both their interests. Rush passed the word back to John Quincy Adams.

The British put their ideas into a formal proposal which Canning presented to Rush in August, 1823. Rush sent it to President Monroe, who sought the advice of Jefferson and Madison. Jefferson responded that while America should avoid involving itself in strictly European matters, European non-intervention in this hemisphere was of sufficient importance that the United States would be well advised to accept the British offer.

Not the pro-British Federalist his father was, John Quincy Adams was not persuaded by the British expressions of friendship. In meetings of Monroe's cabinet in early November, Adams argued that the interests of the United States would be better served by a unilateral declaration. Monroe agreed, and put the declaration into his December 2 speech before Congress.

There were actually two parts to Monroe's speech. One dealt with actions of the Russian government with respect to access to Alaska by ships of other nations. The United States objected to this.

The second related to the former Spanish colonies in Latin America, which had taken advantage of the mother country's distraction by the Napoleonic Wars and achieved for independence in the

early years of the 19th century. By the early 1820s, monarchical elements were in control in continental Europe and rumors about the restoration of the Spanish empire began to fly. This was not good news for the United States, which resented European involvement in its backyard, nor was it met with approval by Britain, which profited richly from Latin American trade.

British foreign minister George Canning proposed to the American government that a joint warning be issued to continental Europe. President Monroe considered the British proposal, but eventually accepted [John Quincy Adams](#)' counsel that America craft an independent statement.

In his message to Congress, Monroe set forth the following principles, which would later become known as the Monroe Doctrine:

- The Western Hemisphere was no longer open for colonization
- The political system of the Americas was different from Europe
- The United States would regard any interference in Western hemispheric affairs as a threat to its security
- The United States would refrain from participation in European wars and would not disturb existing colonies in the Western Hemisphere

The immediate impact of the Monroe Doctrine was mixed. It was successful to the extent that the continental powers did not attempt to revive the Spanish empire, but this was on account of the strength of the British Navy, not American military might, which was relatively limited.

Designed to counter an immediate threat to American interests, Monroe's position did not instantly become a national doctrine. In fact, it largely disappeared from the American political consciousness for a couple decades, until events in the 1840's revived it. The efforts of Britain and France to involve themselves in the annexation of Texas, Britain's disputes in Oregon and potential involvement in California, led to a revival, which President Polk put into words in a speech on December 2, 1845, the 22nd anniversary of the original.

In his annual message to Congress in 1845, Polk reiterated the statement in terms of the prevailing spirit of [Manifest Destiny](#) and applied it to British and Spanish ambitions in the Yucatan. Against this, [John C. Calhoun](#), a member of Monroe's cabinet in 1823, argued against raising a statement in response to a specific situation into a permanent principle. In opposition to the position taken by Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan, Calhoun replied:

Well, would it not be better to wait for the emergency in which we would have sufficient interest to interfere, and sufficient power to make that interference influential? Why make any such declaration now? What good purpose can it serve? Only to show to the men that are to come after us that we were wiser and more patriotic than we feared they might be! I cannot, for my life, see a single good likely to result from this measure ...

However, in the 1850's the principle came to represent not just partisan but national dogma. It was in this period that the word "doctrine" came to be applied to it. In 1861, the United States warned Spain to avoid involvement in the Dominican Republic and was brushed off, but after the triumph of federal armies in 1865 and the failure of Spain's military efforts in the Dominican Republic, Spain beat a retreat in 1865.

The Monroe Doctrine was also invoked by the United States against the involvement of France in the affairs of Mexico. The French had installed Archduke Maximilian of Austria as head of a puppet government in Mexico. Again the United States declared a violation of the Monroe doctrine. The French eventually abandoned Maximilian, who was executed by the Mexicans.

Gradually, the Monroe Doctrine was used for purposes that Monroe himself would not have foreseen. It was cited as a reason that the European powers could not build a canal across

Panama and, further, that if any such canal were ever built, it would necessarily be under the control of the United States.

In 1895, **Grover Cleveland** attempted to invoke the Monroe Doctrine to compel the British to accept arbitration in a border dispute between Venezuela and British Guiana, and went to far as to threaten to create a commission for this purpose if the British did not agree. Eventually the arbitration took place by mutual consent, but the British, through their foreign secretary Lord Salisbury, made it clear that they rejected the idea that the Monroe Doctrine was a legitimate part of international law.

Theodore Roosevelt was never shy about asserting American interests, so it's not surprising that he devised what became known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. In it, Roosevelt acknowledged that at times, chaos in a small country could necessarily lead to the intervention of a great power, and that in the Western Hemisphere, that great power would always be the United States.

The first application of the Roosevelt Corollary was in the Dominican Republic, where the United States compelled that country to give the United States control over its customs, in order to stabilize its finances. This mild application was succeeded by military intervention in Nicaragua and Haiti, as well as the Dominican Republic.

Over the years, the Monroe Doctrine became an object, not of deep appreciation, but of great dislike in Latin America. The countries of Latin America found that they had much more reason to fear intervention by the United States than by any European power. This was particularly evident in the Pan American Conference of 1928. In that year, the United States issued the Clark Memorandum, which definitely repudiated the Roosevelt Corollary. In 1933, Secretary of State Cordell Hull signed a protocol that bound the United States not to intervene in the affairs of any other country in the hemisphere.

Thus a doctrine put in place when the United States was the only power of any international significance has gradually evolved into a policy that respects the emerging sensibilities of the hemisphere's other nations.

---- **Selected Quotes** ----

Quotes regarding Monroe Doctrine.

By James Monroe

In the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken any part, nor does it comport with our policy so to do.

Excerpt from the address declaring the Monroe Doctrine

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