

Monroe Doctrine

Historical Background

The Napoleonic Wars in Europe in the first decades of the nineteenth century stirred nationalist sentiment in both the Old and the New World. As European nations devoted increasing resources to combating Napoleon's invading armies, they politically neglected their colonial holdings abroad. Nationalists in Latin America supported taking up arms against European colonial powers and establishing independent nations. In the United States, the European Napoleonic Wars spawned the War of 1812. British troops burned the U.S. capitol, but U.S. forces succeeded in routing British troops long enough to force a cease-fire and peace treaty. This second defeat of British forces more firmly established the United States as a thriving, independent nation, able to compete with European rivals. However, most members of the United States government sought to keep the nation out of European rivalries. When the revolutions in South America yielded new republics, the United States was left in a precarious position, caught between European and American interests.

Between 1815 and 1823, Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico, Peru, Colombia, and Chile gained their independence and established republics. These fledgling nations needed, and sought, political recognition from larger, more influential nations. Knowing that they could not rely on the monarchist nations of Europe to support break-away democracies, the new American republics sought recognition from the United States.

The Russian emperor had issued a decree in 1821 prohibiting citizens of other nations from navigating and fishing within 100 miles of the north-west coast of North America from the Bering Strait (separating Alaska from Russia) to the 51st parallel (just north of Vancouver, British Columbia). Protests had followed. In July, 1823, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams informed the Russian minister that the United States "should contest the right of Russia to any territorial establishment on this continent, and that we should assume distinctly the principle that the American continents are no longer subjects for any new European colonial establishments."

While Americans generally objected to European colonies in the New World, they also desired to increase United States influence and trading ties throughout the region to their south. European mercantilism posed the greatest obstacle to economic expansion. In particular, Americans feared that Spain and France might reassert colonialism over the Latin American peoples who had just overthrown European rule. Signs that Russia was expanding its presence southward from Alaska toward the Oregon Territory were also disconcerting. In 1823, France invited Spain to restore the Bourbon monarchy with a promise of further aid against insurgent republics in the Americas. The monarchist alliance angered Great Britain, who was politically torn between the need to defend the principles of monarchist government, and keep the French from regaining strongholds in the Americas and the Caribbean.

British Proposal

For their part, the British also had a strong interest in ensuring the demise of Spanish colonialism, with all the trade restrictions mercantilism imposed. Earlier in 1823 British Foreign Minister George Canning suggested to Americans that two nations issue a joint declaration to deter any other power from intervening in Central and South America. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, however, vigorously opposed cooperation with Great Britain, contending that a statement of bilateral nature could limit United States expansion in the future. He also argued that the British were not committed to recognizing the Latin American republics and must have had imperial motivations themselves.

The bilateral statement proposed by the British thereby became a unilateral declaration by the United States. As Monroe stated: "The American continents are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers." Monroe outlined two separate spheres of influence: the Americas and Europe. The independent lands of the Western Hemisphere would be solely the United States' domain. In exchange, the United States pledged to avoid involvement in the political affairs of Europe, such as the ongoing Greek struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire, and not to interfere in the existing European colonies already in the Americas. Monroe counted on Britain to receive the statement as compromise, and recognize its mutual benefit. Indeed, the doctrine eventually worked largely because of backing from Britain.

Development in History

The Monroe Doctrine was formally invoked seventy-five years later at the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. The United States cited Spain's continued involvement in Cuba as a threat to U.S. property and interests. The United States won the conflict against Spain, and in the years following the war, the United States acted to prevent European nations from collecting debts from defaulting Latin American nations and former colonial holdings. When the Dominican Republic was bankrupt in 1904, United States President Theodore Roosevelt issued the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, stating that the United States could preemptively act to ward off European aggression in the Americas.

Roosevelt's extension of the Monroe Doctrine asserted the right of the United States to intervene to stabilize the economic affairs of small states in the Caribbean and Central America if they were unable to pay their international debts. The alternative was intervention by European powers, especially Britain and Germany, which loaned money to the countries that did not repay. The catalyst of the new policy was Germany's aggressiveness in the Venezuela affair of 1902-03.

Monroe Doctrine

The Monroe Doctrine was expressed during President Monroe's seventh annual message to Congress, December 2, 1823.

. . . At the proposal of the Russian Imperial Government, made through the minister of the Emperor residing here, a full power and instructions have been transmitted to the minister of the United States at St. Petersburg to arrange by amicable negotiation the respective rights and interests of the two nations on the northwest coast of this continent. A similar proposal has been made by His Imperial Majesty to the Government of Great Britain, which has likewise been acceded to. The Government of the United States has been desirous by this friendly proceeding of manifesting the great value which they have invariably attached to the friendship of the Emperor and their solicitude to cultivate the best understanding with his Government. In the discussions to which this interest has given rise and in the arrangements by which they may terminate the occasion has been judged proper for asserting, as a principle in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, that the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers. . .

It was stated at the commencement of the last session that a great effort was then making in Spain and Portugal to improve the condition of the people of those countries, and that it appeared to be conducted with extraordinary moderation. It need scarcely be remarked that the results have been so far very different from what was then anticipated. Of events in that quarter of the globe, with which we have so much intercourse and from which we derive our origin, we have always been anxious and interested spectators. The citizens of the United States cherish sentiments the most friendly in favor of the liberty and happiness of their fellow-men on that side of the Atlantic. 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 to do so. It is only when our rights are invaded or seriously menaced that we resent injuries or make preparation for our defense. With the movements in this hemisphere we are of necessity more immediately connected, and by causes which must be obvious to all enlightened and impartial observers. The political system of the allied powers is essentially different in this respect from that of America. This difference proceeds from that which exists in their respective Governments; and to the defense of our own, which has been achieved by the loss of so much blood and treasure, and matured by the wisdom of their most enlightened citizens, and under which we have enjoyed unexampled felicity, this whole nation is devoted. We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety. With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power we have not interfered and shall not interfere. But with the Governments who have declared their independence and maintain it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could

not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States. In the war between those new Governments and Spain we declared our neutrality at the time of their recognition, and to this we have adhered, and shall continue to adhere, provided no change shall occur which, in the judgement of the competent authorities of this Government, shall make a corresponding change on the part of the United States indispensable to their security.

The late events in Spain and Portugal shew that Europe is still unsettled. Of this important fact no stronger proof can be adduced than that the allied powers should have thought it proper, on any principle satisfactory to themselves, to have interposed by force in the internal concerns of Spain. To what extent such interposition may be carried, on the same principle, is a question in which all independent powers whose governments differ from theirs are interested, even those most remote, and surely none of them more so than the United States. Our policy in regard to Europe, which was adopted at an early stage of the wars which have so long agitated that quarter of the globe, nevertheless remains the same, which is, not to interfere in the internal concerns of any of its powers; to consider the government de facto as the legitimate government for us; to cultivate friendly relations with it, and to preserve those relations by a frank, firm, and manly policy, meeting in all instances the just claims of every power, submitting to injuries from none. But in regard to those continents circumstances are eminently and conspicuously different.

It is impossible that the allied powers should extend their political system to any portion of either continent without endangering our peace and happiness; nor can anyone believe that our southern brethren, if left to themselves, would adopt it of their own accord. It is equally impossible, therefore, that we should behold such interposition in any form with indifference. If we look to the comparative strength and resources of Spain and those new Governments, and their distance from each other, it must be obvious that she can never subdue them. It is still the true policy of the United States to leave the parties to themselves, in hope that other powers will pursue the same course. . . .

Thomas Jefferson on the Monroe Doctrine

To the President of the United States (James Monroe)
Monticello, October 24, 1823

DEAR SIR, -- The question presented by the letters you have sent me, is the most momentous which has ever been offered to my contemplation since that of Independence. That made us a nation, this sets our compass and points the course which we are to steer through the ocean of time opening on us. And never could we embark on it under circumstances more auspicious. Our first and fundamental maxim should be, never to entangle ourselves in the broils of Europe. Our second, never to suffer Europe to intermeddle with cis-Atlantic¹ affairs. America, North and South, has a set of interests distinct from those of Europe, and peculiarly her own. She should therefore have a system of her own, separate and apart from that of Europe. While the last is laboring to become the domicile of despotism, our endeavor should surely be, to make our hemisphere that of freedom. One nation, most of all, could disturb us in this pursuit; she now offers to lead, aid, and accompany us in it. By acceding to her proposition, we detach her from the bands, bring her mighty weight into the scale of free government, and emancipate a continent at one stroke, which might otherwise linger long in doubt and difficulty. Great Britain is the nation which can do us the most harm of any one, or all on earth; and with her on our side we need not fear the whole world. With her then, we should most sedulously cherish a cordial friendship; and nothing would tend more to knit our affections than to be fighting once more, side by side, in the same cause. Not that I would purchase even her amity at the price of taking part in her wars. But the war in which the present proposition might engage us, should that be its consequence, is not her war, but ours. Its object is to introduce and establish the American system, of keeping out of our land all foreign powers, of never permitting those of Europe to intermeddle with the affairs of our nations. It is to maintain our own principle, not to depart from it. And if, to facilitate this, we can effect a division in the body of the European powers, and draw over to our side its most powerful member, surely we should do it. But I am clearly of Mr. Canning's² opinion, that it will prevent instead of provoking war. With Great Britain withdrawn from their scale and shifted into that of our two continents, all Europe combined would not undertake such a war. For how would they propose to get at either enemy without superior fleets? Nor is the occasion to be slighted which this proposition offers, of declaring our protest against the atrocious violations of the rights of nations, by the interference of any one in the internal affairs of another, so flagitiously begun by Bonaparte, and now continued by the equally lawless Alliance, calling itself Holy.

But we have first to ask ourselves a question. Do we wish to acquire to our own confederacy any one or more of the Spanish provinces? I candidly confess, that I have ever looked on Cuba as the most interesting addition which could ever be made to our system of States. The control

¹ The Latin prefix *cis* means *on this side of, near*, as in, the near side of the Atlantic—the Americas.

² George Canning was the British Foreign Secretary from 1807-09, and again from 1822-27.

which, with Florida Point, this island would give us over the Gulf of Mexico, and the countries and isthmus bordering on it, as well as all those whose waters flow into it, would fill up the measure of our political well-being. Yet, as I am sensible that this can never be obtained, even with her own consent, but by war; and its independence, which is our second interest, (and especially its independence of England,) can be secured without it, I have no hesitation in abandoning my first wish to future chances, and accepting its independence, with peace and the friendship of England, rather than its association, at the expense of war and her enmity.

I could honestly, therefore, join in the declaration proposed, that we aim not at the acquisition of any of those possessions, that we will not stand in the way of any amicable arrangement between them and the mother country; but that we will oppose, with all our means, the forcible interposition of any other power, as auxiliary, stipendiary, or under any other form or pretext, and most especially, their transfer to any power by conquest, cession, or acquisition in any other way. I should think it, therefore, advisable, that the Executive should encourage the British government to a continuance in the dispositions expressed in these letters, by an assurance of his concurrence with them as far as his authority goes; and that as it may lead to war, the declaration of which requires an act of Congress, the case shall be laid before them for consideration at their first meeting, and under the reasonable aspect in which it is seen by himself.

I have been so long weaned from political subjects, and have so long ceased to take any interest in them, that I am sensible I am not qualified to offer opinions on them worthy of any attention. But the question now proposed involves consequences so lasting, and effects so decisive of our future destinies, as to rekindle all the interest I have heretofore felt on such occasions, and to induce me to the hazard of opinions, which will prove only my wish to contribute still my mite towards anything which may be useful to our country. And praying you to accept it at only what it is worth, I add the assurance of my constant and affectionate friendship and respect.