

The Monroe Doctrine, 1823

Introduction

In the 1790s, the Washington and Adams administrations pursued a policy of neutrality in foreign affairs. Neutrality not only was a guiding principle in the early republic but a necessity: The United States did not maintain an army or navy strong enough to realistically repel foreign attacks. In the early 1800s, the Napoleonic Wars in Europe consumed the attention of most of the great powers for more than a decade. As a result, Spain had difficulty retaining control over its imperial possessions in North and South America. Over the first several decades of the nineteenth century, the people in several countries revolted against Spanish rule and gained independence. In theory, the U.S. government supported those revolutions because it believed independence would allow the United States, rather than Europe, to expand both its territory and its influence in the western hemisphere. In 1823, President James Monroe, fearing Russian designs on the Northwest and European designs on the new republics of Latin America, issued what came to be called the Monroe Doctrine, warning European powers from intervening in the affairs of the western hemisphere in order to prevent threats to American trade and national security.

Sourcing Questions

1. What was the guiding foreign policy principle of the United States in the 1790s and early 1800s?
2. Why was the Monroe Doctrine issued?
3. Who was the intended audience of the Monroe Doctrine?

Vocabulary:

adhere (v): to believe in and stick to

agitate (v): to stir up or disturb

amicable (adj): friendly

conspicuously (adv): obviously

disposition (n): the relation of one thing to another

de facto (adv): in fact or in effect

indispensable (adj): absolutely necessary

Text: The Monroe Doctrine, from President Monroe's seventh annual message to Congress, December 2, 1823¹

1 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
5 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.
10 But with the Governments who have declared their independence and maintained 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.

15 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 judgment of the competent authorities of this Government, shall make
a corresponding change on the part of the United States indispensable to their security. . . .

Our policy in regard to Europe, which was adopted at an early stage of the wars which have so
20 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.

25 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
30 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.

Comprehension Questions

1. What was the difference between the political systems of the United States and Europe in the early 1800s?
2. Why did the European powers present a danger to the peace and security of the United States?
3. What warning did the United States give Europe about intervening in Latin American affairs or in the western hemisphere?
4. What was U.S. policy toward the revolutions against Spain in Latin America?
5. What was U.S. policy toward Europe? What foreign policy principles guided that policy?
6. What policy did the U.S. assert relating to European intervention in Latin America?

Historical Analysis Questions

1. Which European powers and other peoples had settlements in North American territory from 1754 to 1815?
2. Why did the United States want to prevent the European powers from intervening in the new republics that had revolted against Spain?

ⁱ Avalon Project - Monroe Doctrine; December 2 1823.
http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/monroe.asp.