

The Monroe Doctrine, 1823

Introduction

President James Monroe's 1823 annual message to Congress included a warning to European powers not to interfere in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere. This portion of the address is known as the Monroe Doctrine.

The United States was wary of European intervention in Florida, the Pacific Northwest, and Latin America. In 1821, Russia claimed control of the entire Pacific coast from Alaska to Oregon and closed the area to foreign shipping. This development coincided with rumors that Spain, with the help of European allies, was planning to reconquer its former Latin American colonies.

European intervention threatened British as well as American interests. Britain had a flourishing trade with Latin America, which would decline if Spain regained its New World colonies, and had claims to territory in the Oregon country of the Pacific Northwest. In 1823, British Foreign Minister George Canning proposed that the United States and Britain jointly announce their opposition to further European intervention in the Americas.

Secretary of State John Quincy Adams opposed a joint declaration. He convinced President Monroe to make a unilateral declaration of American policy—known as the Monroe Doctrine. Monroe announced that the Western Hemisphere was henceforth closed to further European colonization or puppet monarchs. He also said that the United States would not interfere in internal European affairs.

For much of the nineteenth century, the United States lacked the military strength to prevent European intervention in the New World. But since European meddling threatened British as well as American interests, the Monroe Doctrine was enforced by the Royal Navy. Nevertheless, for the American people, the Monroe Doctrine was the proud symbol of American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. Unilaterally, the United States had defined its rights and interests in the New World.

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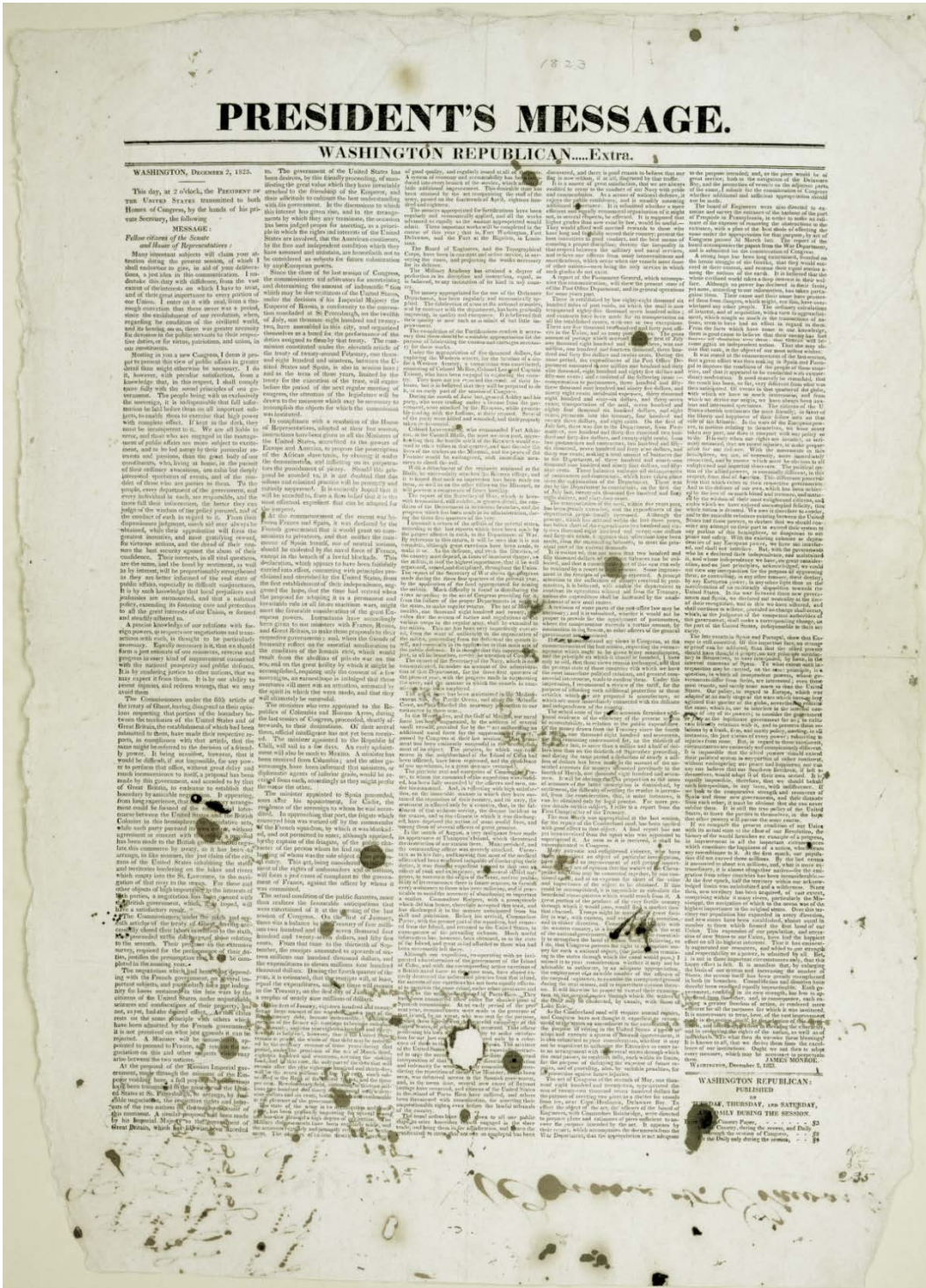
Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, view the image, and read the excerpt. Then apply your knowledge of American history as well as the content of the document to answer the following questions:

1. Use a map of the Western Hemisphere to locate and identify areas that the United States was concerned would be threatened by European intervention and colonization in 1823.
2. President Monroe wrote of the importance of maintaining cordial relations with European nations. He used phrases such as “sentiments the most friendly” and the need “to cultivate friendly relations.” Yet he also noted that if the Europeans made “any attempt . . . to extend their system” to the Western Hemisphere, it would be viewed as a provocative action. Why did James Monroe include these vastly different comments?
3. Explain why it was in the best interest of Great Britain to support the principles of the Monroe Doctrine.
4. Some historians have written that without the support of Great Britain, the Monroe Doctrine was nothing more than a bluff. Take a position on this idea and use specific facts to support or refute the claim.

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Image



James Monroe, The Monroe Doctrine from the President's Annual Message to Congress, Washington Republican Extra, December 2, 1823. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04824)

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James Monroe, The Monroe Doctrine from the President's Annual Message to Congress, *Washington Republican Extra*, December 2, 1823, page 1, col. 3, detail. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04824)

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 result has 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 U. 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 so to do. It is only when our rights are invaded, or seriously menaced, that we resent injuries, or make preparation for our defence. 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 defence 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 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 towards 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 judgment 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 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 any one 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 the hope that other powers will pursue the same course.

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Excerpt

The Monroe Doctrine was expressed during President Monroe's seventh annual message to Congress, December 2, 1823, excerpted here from the *Washington Republican Extra* of that date:

. . . 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 had 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. . . .

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