
The Monroe Doctrine: Repealing European Control in the Americas

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How did the Monroe Doctrine affect the United States' relations with the European powers? What was its impact on the new nation's trade and commerce? The Monroe Doctrine represented a position adopted by President James Monroe during his seventh annual address to Congress on 2 December 1823, which stated that the United States would oppose overtures by European powers against former and now independent colonies of Spain and Portugal in the Western Hemisphere. British Foreign Minister George Canning had proposed that Britain and the United States act together to prevent the resurgence of Bourbon power in the region; however, Monroe, abiding by the counsel of his Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, chose to act unilaterally. As the policy served Great Britain's interests and the US was militarily weak relative to European powers, the Royal Navy served as the primary enforcer of the policy.

To understand how the Monroe Doctrine, as the policy came to be called, originated, one must first look at the continent of Europe after the fall of Louis Napoleon. In reaction to the wars with revolutionary France, on 26 September 1815, Austria, Prussia, and Russia entered into a treaty known as the Holy Alliance. Through the treaty, they sought to reestablish the control of absolute monarchies on the continent. Other European powers quickly signed the accord, including the re-established monarchy of France. France soon took measures to restore the former Spanish King, Ferdinand, to power in Spain as Ferdinand VII in 1823. As the Bourbon monarchies reestablished control, matters concerning the former Spanish colonies in the Western Hemisphere came under considerable discussion. The United States' Minister to Great Britain, Richard Rush, participated in lengthy correspondence and visits with British Foreign Secretary George Canning to discuss the potential impact of the Holy Alliance upon the Americas.

Amongst the European powers, only Great Britain and Rome did not sign the Holy Alliance accord—all the others eventually signed the compact. One provision of the treaty, which greatly concerned the Anglo-American powers, was a section that bound all parties to support and defend dynastic houses, and to

assist one another to repel revolutions and rebellion.¹ Just how this pact would play out in recovering lost colonies in the Americas, was not clear; however, the battle of Trocadero, on 31 August 1823, sealed the fate of the constitutionalists in Spain, and set the stage for monarchy's return to Spain.

The great powers of Europe, having lent support to France for the invasion of Spain and the restoration of absolute monarchism by Ferdinand VII, did not stop there. The issue of the former Spanish colonies was foremost in the minds of many government ministers. Diplomatic discussions between Canning and Rush concerned matters of the Spanish Americas from time to time, but not as often as Rush desired. In fact, after the fall of Cadiz in Spain, there was not any conversation between Canning and Rush regarding the topic.² Rush felt that Britain concerned itself with commerce more than justice for the people of the continent of Europe, as well as the residents of South America.³

It was clear that Britain's interests in South America were purely economic. The Napoleonic War in Europe, as well as the continental system Napoleon installed, greatly decreased the amount of goods exported from Great Britain. England was in the midst of its industrial revolution, which meant it created greater means of production as well as greater stocks of goods. Exports were steadily decreasing to the continent, however, while exports increased to the former Spanish colonies.⁴ The United States was interested in gaining trade with the new nations in South America, as well.

President Monroe extended diplomatic recognition of the new nations in South America, sending diplomats and extending the courtesy to the new national heads of state to send diplomats to Washington, D.C.⁵ While discussions between Rush and Canning continued through the fall, they fell off markedly after late September 1823. President Monroe sought the advice of former Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison with regard to a possible cooperative statement with Great Britain.⁶ Jefferson and Madison appeared in favor of some sort of joint statement with Britain regarding European interference in South America.

Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, was in favor of a unilateral statement, having reservations concerning British intentions. He did not want to appear, "as a cock boat in the wake of a British man-of-war."⁷ It appears even as far back as 1823, the United States considered annexing Texas, as well as Cuba. Still, the matter of possible invasion by members of the Holy Alliance was a real

threat. The Holy Alliance decided that representative government was incompatible with the principles of monarchical sovereignty and divine right.⁸ If they were successful in their efforts with Spain, what was to stop them from attempting to revert former colonies to Spanish rule?

On 9 October 1823, France and Britain signed the Polignac Memorandum, in which France agreed not to seek colonial possession of former Spanish colonies in South America. This was, of course, the reason for Canning's lack of continued interest in seeking a joint statement against European aggression in South America.

This situation still concerned the United States' interests in Latin America. A French fleet might still sail towards the Americas, though the agreement France had with Britain against intervention was still new. This was the setting in October 1823, when President Monroe began considering the situation and possible statement on the matter.

Thomas Edington, in his book *The Monroe Doctrine*, states British Foreign Minister Canning as the real behind-the-scenes creator of the Monroe Doctrine.⁹ It was Canning's belief that a bold statement against intervention by European powers into South America was a necessity. Of course, the British backed this belief based on purely economic factors. The United States, through its ministers to Britain as well as Secretary of State Adams, believed action was necessary to curtail possible involvement of the Holy Alliance into reclaiming former Spanish territory.

James Fawcett, in *The Origin and Text of the Monroe Doctrine*, points out that the Holy Alliance announced after the subjugation of the Spanish revolt, that



Figure 1 *James Monroe 1758-1860*. Oil on canvas by Rembrandt Peale, 1817-1825. James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library, Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Spain intended to conquer Spanish American states. Therefore, on 2 December 1823, in a joint session of Congress, President James Monroe declared any attempt by European powers to extend their system of government to any portion of the Western Hemisphere as, “dangerous to our peace and safety.”¹¹ This became one of the most important pieces of international diplomacy for the next 170 years.

The United States Navy was still relatively young compared to the British Navy, which was at the height of its power. It was clear that the British Navy was partially responsible for enforcing the tenets of the Monroe Doctrine.¹² In a letter to former President Thomas Jefferson, former President James Madison stated, “with the British power and navy combined with ours, we have nothing to fear from the rest of the world.”¹³

In regards to Latin America, Foreign Secretary Canning engaged in negotiations with Prince de Polignac of France. These placed the British Navy in the center of the potential battle map. Fearing the power of the British Navy, France did not seek to pursue any attempts to colonize or control Latin America.¹⁴ Every nation was aware Britain maintained the largest navy in the world and the members of the Holy Alliance did not want to tangle with Britain on international waters.¹⁵

British Honduras, later known as Belize, became an area of concern after the implementation of the Monroe Doctrine. Britain initially set up Belize as a logging settlement. Spain argued against the settlement, and later destroyed it. After quite some time, a few of the initial settlers who survived the destruction of the settlement and imprisonment in Cuba returned to rebuild the settlement. Under the consideration of the Monroe Doctrine, this area existed as a prior settlement of the British.¹⁶

Another incident in the area of Belize occurred at the Bay Islands. In this case, years after the British formally documented their claims to Belize, Britain decided to lay claim to the Bay Islands as a part of Belize. Great Britain and the United States dispatched war ships to the area, and it became an intense subject of negotiations between Britain and the United States, with the United States Minister to England, James Buchanan, taking a leading role. During negotiations, the United States invoked the Monroe Doctrine and Great Britain eventually turned over the Bay Islands to Honduras, who claimed right of ownership.¹⁷

The next major test of the Monroe Doctrine occurred during the American Civil War. Embroiled in battle, the United States was in no position to enforce the

Monroe Doctrine upon the French. France, under Napoleon III, took control of Mexico, on the premise of suspension of interest payments to Mexico's main creditors—Spain, France, and Britain. Napoleon III installed a new Bourbon familial Emperor, Don Maximilian, who was an Austrian Habsburg. The problem with the situation in Mexico was the \$12 million debt in bonds held by France. France goaded Britain and Spain into assisting them with taking control of Vera Cruz, in an attempt to protect bondholders in their respective countries. Britain and Spain handled their affairs in Mexico, but the French ambition soon became known when France installed Maximilian on an imperial throne of Mexico.¹⁸

After the conclusion of the American Civil War, United States Secretary of State, William Seward, began intense correspondence with the Minister Bigelow of France. The situation took care of itself with the capture and execution of Maximilian during a revolution in 1867.¹⁹ This effectively ended French involvement in Mexican affairs, as the French troops withdrew before the fall of Maximilian.

Throughout the history of Latin America, since throwing off the mantle of absolute monarchs, anarchy mixed with democracy and despotism. The history of Mexico alone is rife with revolutions and new governments. Attempting to model their government after the United States and its Constitution, failure after failure fell upon their heads. New Granada, now known as Colombia, also has a rich history of strife and revolution. She had three other sections break away and become nations unto themselves. Peru, Venezuela, and Panama were all once part of Colombia.

The institution of the Monroe Doctrine through the nineteenth century ensured Latin America's ability to determine its own destiny. However, lack of cooperation and consensus continued to breed one revolution after another. Without the Monroe Doctrine, Latin America would surely have come under the control of European powers, such as Spain and France. One has to wonder if Latin America would have been better off with reverting to colonial status, if even for a number of decades.

The Monroe Doctrine also prohibited foreign powers that held control of territories in the Americas from transferring those territories to other foreign powers.²⁰ An area of interest is the colonization of New Zealand and Fiji. In his book, Edington made little mention of this situation, and the United States did not object to the control of either island by Great Britain.²¹

The Monroe Doctrine was an attempt to curtail the involvement of European powers in North, Central, and South America. The view of neutrality long held by the government of the United States served to keep the fledgling nation out of the entangling affairs of the continent of Europe and secure trade for her commerce as a neutral state. This doctrine served United States foreign policy from 2 December 1823, into the twentieth century.

Notes

1. Thomas B. Edington, *The Monroe Doctrine* (Cambridge, Mass: University Press, 1904), 2.

2. Ibid., 23.

3. Ibid., 23.

4. Leonard A. Lawson, *The relation of British policy to the declaration of the Monroe doctrine* (New York: Columbia University, 1922), 78-80.

5. Mark T. Gilderhus, "The Monroe Doctrine: Meanings and Implications," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (March 2006): 7.

6. Ibid., 7.

7. Ibid., 7.

8. James W. Fawcett, "*The Origin and Text of the Famous Monroe Doctrine*," *Congressional Digest* 18, no. 3 (March 1939): 74.

9. Edington, 51.

10. Fawcett, 75.

11. James Monroe, "Seventh Annual Message," *Messages and Papers of the Presidents, James Monroe, Vol. 1*, 776.

12. Gilderhus, 8.

13. Lawson, 127.

14. Ibid., 137.

15. Ibid., 143.

16. Edington, 60-64. The Monroe Doctrine never contested the area known as British Honduras.

17. Ibid., 65-67. The decision to return the Bay Islands to Honduras narrowly averted war between Britain and the United States on the premise of the Monroe Doctrine.

18. Ibid., 121.

19. Ibid., 74. The fact that the United States was embroiled in a bitter civil war allowed France to enter Mexico without any correspondence or warning by the United States with regard to the Monroe Doctrine.

20. Ibid., 97.

21. Ibid., 103.

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