

# Economics, Diplomacy, and the Monroe Doctrine

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The growing spirit of national pride following the stalemate between the United States and Great Britain in the War of 1812, Napoleon's defeat on the European continent in 1815, and the ongoing independence movements in Latin America, had a profound impact on the young nation. Not only did these events influence the course of American foreign policy, but also its economic development. Although there is no precise explanation, economic historians tend to agree that between 1815 and 1860, the rate of growth of the American economy accelerated. It is no coincidence that American foreign policymakers understood the importance of freedom movements in Spanish America as potential markets for the exchange of goods and commodities. Economically, the most interesting development during this period was the revival of manufacturing in the United States. Certainly, the development of an independent foreign policy based on United States national interests as embodied in the Monroe Doctrine was the major diplomatic achievement of the new nation's first generation of political leaders. The Monroe Doctrine serves as an excellent example of how economic considerations and diplomatic strategies dictated the future course of United States involvement in Spanish America (Dangerfield, 1965; North, 1996).

By 1822 the American continents, North and South, were still not completely free of foreign occupiers. Russia held on to the vast and unexplored territory of Alaska and sought to maintain its rights over the Pacific waters. Great Britain remained in charge of Canada and numerous islands in the Caribbean. Spain, despite the independence spirit sweeping Mexico and nations to the south remained firmly in control of Cuba and Puerto Rico. France and the Netherlands ruled in French and Dutch Guiana as well as some islands in the Caribbean. Cautiously, the United States kept its eyes on the southwest United States and the lands across the Rocky Mountains bordering the Pacific Ocean. The acquisition of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 and the preservation of the young nation after the war with Great Britain in 1812 reinforced the notion that "manifest destiny" – the fulfillment of the natural boundaries from the Atlantic to the Pacific – was within reach. The revolutions in Mexico and other Latin America countries to rid the yoke of imperialist domination by Spain and Portugal gave added weight to a developing American foreign policy (Perkins, 1955).

## Latin American Revolutions

The Latin American revolutions between 1808 and 1822 were warmly received in the United States. Many Americans viewed the struggle for independence as a continuation of their own earlier fight for freedom. The daring exploits of Latin American revolutionaries like Bolivar, San Martin, and O'Higgins

rekindled fond memories of those like Patrick Henry, Sam Adams, and John Adams, as well as a host of other 1776 heroes. Although the American government was officially neutral in the conflicts between Spain and Portugal on the one hand and their colonial holdings on the other, United States officials watched these developments very carefully (Whitaker, 1941).

The final defeat of Napoleon had led a number of European nations to join in a series of alliances designed to put down revolutions while maintaining their legitimacy to the throne. The Congress of Vienna (1815), Quadruple Alliance (1815), and the Holy Alliance (1815-1818), instigated by Tsar Alexander of Russia had as their aim a restoration of the old order in Europe. Only a few years after these arrangements were in place, however, Americans became alarmed by rumors that France, encouraged by the European arrangements, would assist Spain in reacquiring its New World possessions.

The final expulsion of Spanish armies from Latin America was marked by a sharp rise in United States trade with the new countries. In 1822, President James Monroe extended formal diplomatic recognition to La Plata, Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Mexico. Riding the crest of nationalistic fervor, combined with commercial expansion to the southern continent and territorial development west of the Mississippi River, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams urged American diplomats to concentrate their efforts on acquiring favorable trading rights. Shrewd and calculating in his deliberations, Adams was clear in his instructions that he did not want the newly independent nations to exchange Spanish hegemony for English commercial absolutism (Bemis, 1943).

Adams eyed future Latin American markets and possible territorial acquisitions such as Texas or Cuba. He did not trust the British or their intentions, and persuaded Monroe to make an announcement without British participation. In his annual message to Congress on December 2, 1823, President Monroe announced an American foreign policy that years later would be named after him. He declared American rights to sail in the Pacific waters, recognized the complete and full independence of the revolutionary governments of Latin America, and asserted the right of the United States to protect the Western Hemisphere from Europe for economic and security reasons (Paterson, 1983).

The Monroe Doctrine was primarily concerned with two important principles. The first, non-colonization, was aimed at preventing any European power in the future from forming new colonies in the Western hemisphere. To a certain extent, the doctrine strengthened the United States' hegemony in the Americas and served as a measure of continental security, which would enable the United States unfettered access to such markets. This principle was primarily directed at Tsar Alexander, who, in 1821, announced that Russian dominion extended southward from Alaska along the Pacific to the fifty-first parallel. The second principle, nonintervention, was a two-sided coin. The U.S. would be precluded from taking part in European wars, reinforcing the distinct differences in political systems. Conversely, it implied as "un-friendly" any efforts by European powers to oppress or control the futures of the independent countries of the New World. This committed the U.S. to a leading role in world politics (May, 1975).

Overseas, the immediate effect of Monroe's pronouncement was hardly earth shattering.

Statesmen in Europe dismissed it as “blustering,” “monstrous,” and “arrogant,” but no formal protests were delivered from the heads of government in Europe. Latin American capitals received the message with cordial respect. However, when Washington failed to negotiate military alliances with Colombia and Brazil disillusionment quickly surfaced. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect to the entire diplomatic journey was that the upstart United States managed to issue such a bold statement without the military power to back it up. Fortunately, the European powers were too concerned about their own commercial ventures and maintaining the balance of power in their own backyard that they paid very little attention to Monroe’s message.

At home, the public’s response was positive and enthusiastic. The anti-European, anti-British thrust of the message reached a receptive audience. The United States proclaimed a policy of “America for Americans.” Adams was well aware that the United States did not possess the required muscle to back up Monroe’s words with deeds. Actually, Great Britain was most responsible for giving the Monroe Doctrine its lasting strength. Because the British navy controlled the Atlantic seas, it was with her Majesty’s consent that United States ships were able to sail freely between Europe and the New World. What helped foster the Doctrine’s viability was the reality that British merchants were primarily interested in preserving the independence of the emerging nations in Central and South America.

The Monroe Doctrine became a major principle of United State foreign policy after the Civil War with the onrush of industrialism. Ironically, Monroe’s message, despite its anti-imperialist rhetoric, would be employed by future generations to further American expansionism in the name of “hemispheric solidarity and republic principles,” including Teddy Roosevelt’s “Big Stick” policy, the construction of the Panama Canal, and William H. Taft’s more amicable policy of “Dollar Diplomacy.” With the end of the Civil War a reunified nation, one bursting at the seams with industrial growth and westward expansion, gave relevance to the Doctrine’s importance. Such importance would thrust the United States into a leading position in world politics and, eventually, global economic dominance (May, 1975).

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