

Lesson Fifty

The Monroe Doctrine

LESSON IDEA

To explain why the Monroe Doctrine was needed, its effects, and how the policy gave official expression to a principle that dated back to the founding of our Republic.

PREPARATION

Have the map used for Lesson 48 available. Read the "During The Week" section and prepare for the suggested discussions.

JOHAN QUINCY ADAMS, Secretary of State under President James Monroe, better understood 19th century Englishmen than any other U.S. statesman at the time. As a result, he could counter their haughty arrogance with unequalled skill. It was fortunate, since in 1821 the British minister to the United States, Stratford Canning, became restive about the establishment of a permanent American settlement in Oregon at the point where the Columbia River empties into the Pacific. [Use the map from Lesson 48 to pinpoint the "Oregon Country."]

Ownership of the Oregon Country, which lay west of the Rocky Mountains and outside the boundaries of the Louisiana Territory, was an unsettled question at the time. The English had opened maritime trade along its coast in 1785, but Captain Robert Gray of Boston had established an American claim to it in 1792 by discovering the mouth of the Columbia River. Lewis and Clark solidified that claim in 1805 by exploring its wilderness lands. In 1818, a temporary compromise was reached when England and the United States agreed that the territory should remain under joint occupation for ten years. The British meant to use the time to push the Americans out and absorb Oregon into their Canadian empire. But as American pioneer families pushed westward, The British began to feel uneasy that a handful of English traders might not be able to hold the country against a multitude of American settlers gradually taking possession of the land. Canning was determined to keep the territory under British control. When news reached him that American frontiersmen were moving into

Oregon with an eye to settling near the mouth of the Columbia River, he demanded an explanation of U.S. motives and plans.

Adams put a stop to this audacious inquisition with a simple, pointed question: "Have you any claim to the mouth of the Columbia River?" His meaning was clear. An American sea captain, not an Englishman, had discovered the river's mouth. And in 1805 the American explorers Lewis and Clark had established winter quarters in the area after exploring the Oregon wilderness.

But Canning chose to ignore the obvious. "Why," he replied disdainfully, "do you not know that we have a claim?"

Adams retorted, "I do not know what you claim nor what you do not claim. You claim India; you claim Africa; you claim . . ."

"Perhaps," said Canning sarcastically, "a piece of the moon."

"No," responded Adams, "I have not heard you claim exclusively any part of the moon; but there is not a spot on this habitable globe that I could affirm you do not claim!"

Despite England's claims and imperial ambitions, America ultimately secured the land — not because we saw it first, but because our frontiersmen settled it first, plowing the ground, planting the crops, and living on the farms. The Oregon Country later was later divided into three states. Can you name them? [Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. The treaty that made the Oregon wilderness an American possession, and established a new boundary between the U.S. and Britain, was signed in 1846.]

ADAMS DISPLAYED the same firm attitude toward Russia when that imperial nation began extending her tentacles of power down the Pacific coast from Alaska. Russians demanded that the fisheries of Northern Canada be reserved for its own use, and that ships from other nations be forbidden to approach within 100 miles. Its trading posts already extended 500 miles south of the Columbia River,

