

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,

to a point 30 miles from the Spanish settlements in California. Ships from the Russian merchant fleet roamed the Pacific loaded with valuable cargoes of furs.

In July 1823, when discussions arose concerning the Russian possessions in the Northwest, Adams firmly informed Baron Tuyle, representative of the Czarist government, that "we should contest the rights of Russia to any territorial establishment on this continent, and that we should assume distinctly the principle that the American continents are no longer subjects for any new European colonial establishments." Five months later (December 1823), President Monroe made this policy an official political dictum of the United States. It became famous as the Monroe Doctrine.

Before reviewing the President's reasons for the pronouncement, let us learn more about the huge section of our country, south of Oregon and west of the Louisiana Territory, that was labeled "Spanish Possessions" on maps in the early 1800s. [Identify the territory from the map in Lesson 47.]

The story is rather long and complicated, covering many years, but here is a thumbnail summary of what happened:

Many Latin American* countries (Mexico, Colombia, Chile, and Venezuela, to name a few) had been colonized by Spain, much as the states along our eastern seaboard had been colonized by England. Little was done by these Spanish colonies to achieve independence until 1808. In that year, Napoleon invaded Spain, exiled the king, and placed a Bonaparte on the throne. South America erupted in revolution when the Spanish colonists refused to accept the Frenchman as their monarch. Once begun, the struggle for independence began to follow its natural course, ending in a conflict with Spain. Not even the defeat of Napoleon, the return of the Spanish king, or the presence of Spanish troops in South America could quell the revolutions. For years there were seesaw battles as freedoms were granted, then denied; towns pillaged and burned; women and children massacred; congresses convened and disbanded; and constitutions proclaimed and discarded.

FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

John Quincy Adams, by Ann Weil, is recommended for children ages six to twelve. It describes the boyhood (and early manhood) adventures and experiences of this unusually gifted American statesman. Though out-of-print, it may be available at a public library.

MANY AMERICANS and Europeans sympathized with the Spanish colonists. Hundreds of volunteer troops from England, Scotland, and Ireland joined the ranks of the revolutionaries. Many adventurous westerners from the United States enlisted in the patriot armies of Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia. Many Americans intensely followed newspaper accounts of the fighting. In Congress, there were emotional pleas for American recognition of the revolutionary governments. We can understand this profound interest, especially as regards the Mexican revolution, when we recognize that Mexico's huge territory included the present states of Texas, California, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona.

When James Monroe became President of the United States, and John Quincy Adams served as Secretary of State, the revolutions in Spanish America were at their peak. Adams, as a matter of policy, refused to allow our country to become involved. He viewed the revolutionary wars as family feuds between Spain and her colonies that posed no threat to the United States. It was best, he believed, for our country to remain aloof from European politics and pursue the course so set by President George Washington. Do you remember Washington's advice regarding foreign policy? [Ask family members to paraphrase Washington's quotation from Lesson 47: "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible.... Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation." The essence of those sentiments, if not the precise words, should be understood each member of the family.]

Many Americans, caught up in the intoxicating

*Latin America: that part of the Western Hemisphere south of the U.S. where Spanish, Portuguese, and French are the official languages.

speeches espousing liberty, freedom, and independence, were ready to ignore Washington's wise foreign policy counsel. To such enthusiasts, the South American revolutions seemed to be carbon copies of our own struggle for independence from England. But there were many important differences, as Adams obviously realized. Historian Donzella Cross Boyle summed them up in these words:

Although Great Britain and Spain had the same idea, that colonies existed for the benefit of the mother country, the British colonials gained a large measure of self-government. While still subjects of Great Britain they learned to enjoy freedoms and to fight for them....

The Spanish colonies were ruled almost entirely by officials (called viceroys, i.e., deputies "in place of the king") sent over from Spain.

These viceroys had mounted guards, fine carriages, and the trappings of royalty. In the villages the people had a small voice in local affairs, but not enough for them to learn how to govern themselves in a separate nation. Therefore, the independence movement in Latin America was like a game of "follow the leader." It rose and fell with the success and failure of the military chiefs who led the uprising.

CONSTITUTIONS could be written, and impressively-worded declarations of independence issued, but such documents would be meaningless if the concept of self-government was not actually desired, understood, and practiced by the people themselves. The Latin American revolutionaries merely succeeded in replacing a harsh European master with home-grown tyrants. They did not understand, and did not accept, the American ideal of government as a servant, rather than master, of its citizens. Neither do most of their descendants today. [Discuss recent political developments in some Latin American countries. Use examples to show that, over the years, most of the countries have simply replaced one collectivist despot with another, without achieving the limited self-government that was character of the post-revolutionary American Republic.]

By 1822, most Latin American countries (including Mexico) had won their independence from Spain (or, in some cases, Portugal or France). In recognition of that reality, Adams was willing to appoint ministers to represent the United States in their capitals. The autocratic governments of Europe, however, had no intention of allowing the upstart republics to continue their independent course. If Spain alone could not subjugate them, the Holy Alliance — an imperial combine that included Russia and several other European nations — would use its military might to bring them to heel. It would be a crusade to champion tyranny, despite the stated purpose of the Holy Alliance: to unite all member nations in a Christian brotherhood that would exemplify the tenets of Christianity.

Adams was not misled by the beguiling talk of Christian brotherhood. He knew, as did most statesmen, that once the nations of the Holy Alliance invested money and manpower in a South American war, they would expect territorial gains as a reward. To Americans, the prospect of Russia settling into California or France moving into Mexico was an immediate and direct threat to United States sovereignty. How long could the U.S. remain free and independent if Europeans were allowed to conquer its neighbors? England, too, was concerned, since she had developed a highly profitable trade with the new South American republics. And since Britain did not belong to the Holy Alliance, she stood to lose that trade if the imperialistic objectives of the Alliance were achieved.

Adams advised President Monroe to issue a strong "hands-off" policy statement aimed at the Holy Alliance. Monroe was concerned, however, that such a bold declaration might mark us as an aggressor bent on conquest. He considered issuing a joint declaration with Britain, in which both countries would underscore their opposition to any attempt by the Holy Alliance to take any part of the Americas by force of arms. Two former presidents, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, supported this relatively cautious approach, but John Quincy Adams firmly opposed it. To adopt a discreet and affected stance to please Europe, he insisted, would merely convince the world that the American government was hypocritical. It would, he asserted, be more dignified to state our

principles directly to Russia and France than to “come in as a cockboat in the wake of a British man-of-war.” What did he mean by that? [Explain the difference between the difference in size between a cockboat and a man-of-war. Discuss the political significance of this comparison.]

Adams’ persuasive arguments eventually carried the day. When Congress assembled on December 2, 1823, it heard President Monroe boldly announce “that the American continents are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European power.” He explained that the political systems in Europe were vastly different from those in the Americas. “With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power,” he recalled, “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 toward the United States.”

The most powerful plank of the new doctrine was contained in these words of the U.S. commander-in-chief: “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.” (Emphasis added.) It clearly meant war, if necessary.

The Monroe Doctrine struck European diplomats like a bolt of lightning. The Holy Alliance, already weakening, was shattered. As a decisive statement of American foreign policy, the doctrine held the European autocrats at bay for more than a century.

Concluding Thought

President Monroe did not originate (and may not have authored) the doctrine that bears his name, but he is nevertheless the one who placed the power and prestige of his office behind its crucial terms. His words brought the aggressive plans of the Old World tyrants for the New World to an

abrupt halt.

DURING THE WEEK

Use informal periods of conversation during the week to discuss how the Monroe Doctrine, if applied by contemporary statesmen, would have affected our country’s relations with Cuba, the sell-out of the Panama Canal, the our dealings with Red China.