

# The history of the monroe doctrine history essay



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Each of the early Presidents of the United States had his own foreign policy. Some Presidents wanted to be isolated from European activities, while others were constantly trying to make alliances with Britain or France. Despite their differences, past Presidents have generally agreed that they had to protect the country. Monroe's foreign policy, centered on the pillars of nonintervention and noncolonization, greatly influenced the general policies of later Presidents. These Presidents did not completely obey the principles of the Monroe Doctrine, but they used it as a general outline for their own foreign policies.

From its beginning, the United States had a history of being caught in European affairs. As colonies, America depended on the mother country for manufactured products and military defense. The colonies also inherited Britain's enemies, especially France and Spain. After the Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War, Britain became one of America's enemies as well. Knowing how bad foreign entanglements could be, George Washington's Farewell Address urged the nation to avoid alliances (Kennedy, Cohen, and Bailey).

Geographically, the early United States was surrounded by other colonies under the control of various European powers. Britain controlled Canada, Spain controlled Florida, and France owned Louisiana. In addition, Russia claimed a piece of the northwest part of Oregon. The United States generally disliked these foreign colonies; they limited territorial expansion and, more importantly, posed a danger to the national security of the infant country (Kennedy, Cohen, and Bailey).

In 1820s, several revolutions broke out in Europe, threatening to replace the monarchical governments with more democratic ones. In response, Austria, France, Prussia, and Russia formed the Holy Alliance. In the Troppau Circular of 1820, these countries declared that they would intervene and stop revolutions. With the exception of the Greek revolution, which the Holy Alliance assisted, the Quadruple Alliance stopped several revolts throughout Europe. The action most troubling to the United States was when France intervened in Spain to restore Ferdinand VII to the throne. American politicians worried that the Holy Allies would also intervene to help Spain keep its New World colonies, which were rebelling for independence; this would make the United States more vulnerable to foreign attacks and inhibit its ability to become the dominant power in North America (Sexton 49).

Britain also feared European intervention in the New World. Because it was the leading industrial power of the time, Britain wanted to expand its markets to Spanish America. In addition, Russia had claimed some territory that was part of British Canada (Rappaport 2). George Canning, the British foreign minister, wanted to issue a joint warning against intervention in America. Jefferson, Calhoun, and Monroe wanted to accept Canning's offer because it would be beneficial to ally themselves with Britain. However, John Quincy Adams favored rejecting the offer because it would help British competition for Latin American markets. Monroe's cabinet's stances on the joint declaration also depended on sectional divisions; Adams, a Northerner, opposed it because he viewed Britain as an industrial competitor, while the others, who were Southerners, viewed Britain as a market for cotton (Sexton 51).

Adams proposed that Monroe should give a unilateral declaration instead, which he did. Monroe's message on foreign policy was delivered as part of his 1823 State of the Union address. In just three paragraphs, he stated that America is "not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers" and that European efforts to "extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere" will be seen as "dangerous to our peace and safety" (Monroe). These two ideas, noncolonization and nonintervention, make up what came to be known as the Monroe Doctrine.

The Monroe Doctrine was idealistic, and at times, it even seemed self-contradictory. It never actually became law. In fact, both Webster and Clay proposed resolutions that attempted to implement the Monroe Doctrine; neither of them passed, on the grounds that enforcing noncolonization and nonintervention would require an active and entangling foreign policy (Sexton 69). In order to enforce noncolonization, the United States would have to resort to intervention itself. While the Doctrine prohibited European colonization, it left a loophole for continued American expansion. It asserted that the "expansion of our population and accession of new States to our Union have had the happiest effect on all its highest interests" (Monroe), essentially advocating the annexation of more territories in the future. When the message was delivered to Congress in 1823, the United States had almost no means of enforcing it; having been an independent country for less than half a century, the United States hardly had enough military power to contest any European aggression. In fact, Europeans originally saw the Monroe Doctrine as a statement of American arrogance and largely ignored it (Kennedy, Cohen, and Bailey 253).

The Monroe administration intentionally formulated the Monroe Doctrine in a way such that it said what European powers could not do, yet it avoided saying how it would define United States foreign policy. This open-endedness made the Monroe Doctrine only a basic outline; several future Presidents reinterpreted it to help them accomplish their goals (Sexton 104).

The Holy Allies decided not to intervene in Spanish America. The Monroe Doctrine had no effect on their decision. Two months before Monroe's 1823 address was given, the French ambassador Prince de Polignac had already pledged not to intervene in the Spanish colonies. In his 1824 address the next year, Monroe claimed that his previous message had prevented foreign intervention, making the Monroe Doctrine seem more powerful than it actually was (Sexton 65).

James Monroe, the author of the Doctrine, used it to dissuade foreign intervention in the New World that would threaten American national security.

John Quincy Adams, Monroe's successor, interpreted the Monroe Doctrine as a declaration of the United States' supremacy in the western hemisphere. At this time, the United States was the leading power outside of Europe; Adams wanted to avoid European intervention or colonization, which would create competition for power in America. Adam's administration show the shift of the Monroe Doctrine from a defensive declaration to aggressive foreign policy.

Adams wanted the United States to assume control of Spanish America. In 1825, Simón Bolívar organized the Panama Congress in an effort to unite the

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Latin American countries. Bolivar almost decided against inviting the United States because the congress would give it an opportunity to force its control upon Spanish America. Sure enough, Adams planned to use the congress to get a joint declaration of the Monroe Doctrine from other American nations and to acquire commercial treaties for the United States. However, the United States did not manage to achieve its goals in the Congress of Panama (Sexton 74).

The Panama Congress developed the idea that the United States was racially superior to Latin America. During this time, Americans began dividing the New World into North and South America, as opposed to seeing America as a whole earlier. They reconciled themselves with European powers, while claiming superiority over Spanish American nations (Sexton 79).

The new twist on the Monroe Doctrine, claiming American superiority in the New World, antagonized Latin Americans. They began to see the Monroe Doctrine as a moral rationalization for the United States to take advantage of South America to fulfill their own selfish goals. Latin Americans believed that Adam's modifications to the Monroe Doctrine had "perverted" the Doctrine (Rappaport 102).

In addition, there was some conflict over the possibility of recognizing Haiti's independence. Since the Missouri Compromise of 1820, slavery supporters looked to expand slavery in South America, especially Cuba, which was already a slave nation. They feared that recognizing the independence of Haiti, which was formed after a successful slave rebellion, would incite further abolition in South America (Sexton 77).

Andrew Jackson mostly agreed with Adams's policy of establishing United States supremacy in the Western Hemisphere. Jackson also wanted commercial expansion in South America, but he was more willing to compromise. In 1830, he signed an agreement with Britain that allowed limited trade to the British West Indies. Although supporting this British colony contradicted the Monroe Doctrine, Jackson believed that economic cooperation with Britain, the largest market at the time, would be more beneficial than exclusive trade with South America. Jackson's administration did nothing when Britain seized control of the Falkland Islands in 1833 (Sexton 82).

Jackson also changed the focus of American expansion from South America to the western half of North America. Instead of annexing Latin American territory, he appointed diplomats to those countries as part of his spoils system (Sexton 82).

Jackson's Indian Removal Act was very influential in shaping on the Monroe Doctrine. In this act, the Cherokees and several other Native American tribes were uprooted and moved to present-day Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears (Kennedy, Cohen, and Bailey 266). Jackson saw Native Americans as a threat because they tended to make alliances with European powers. In addition, removing the Indians agreed with the Monroe Doctrine's noncolonization policy. Without Indians occupying territory in the United States, there would be more room for American expansion as well. Jackson's administration detached the United States from South American affairs and precluded the imperialist policy of James K. Polk.

Although he never managed to become President, Calhoun still had considerable power as secretary of war under Monroe, vice president under Adams and Jackson, and secretary of state under Tyler (Bucco). Calhoun had opposed recognizing Haiti back in Adam's presidency. Abolition was spreading, and slavery was already prohibited in the North, Mexico, and some Latin American states. Furthermore, Britain abolished slavery in 1833 (Sexton 87).

John C. Calhoun used the new expansionist tint of the Monroe Doctrine to advance slavery. In 1836, Texas declared independence from antislavery Mexico. Tyler and Calhoun pressed to annex Texas and make it a slave state. They feared that if Texas fell into Britain's abolitionist grasp, slavery would be confined to the southeast. As a slave state, Texas would also maintain the sectional balance of power in the Senate. Despite dissent from the abolitionist North, Texas joined the United States in in 1845.

In addition, Calhoun wanted to make sure Cuba remained a slave nation. Although Calhoun planned to allow Spain to keep Cuba, he would have called for annexation if slavery on the island were threatened. Calhoun supported the Ostend Manifesto, which called for the American purchase or annexation of Cuba if the peculiar institution of slavery was threatened there (Sexton 96).

James K. Polk's foreign policy was based on expansionism. Manifest Destiny, the idea that the United States should stretch across all of North America, greatly influenced Polk's objectives. Two of Polk's campaign promises were to acquire Oregon from Britain and California from Mexico.



California would have been beneficial to the United States because it had good harbors, fertile land, opened trade to Asia, and had gold, as settlers later found out. Polk also drew support for expansion from the Monroe Doctrine by exaggerating the threat of European action in America. Polk claimed that the British planned to gain control of California, making the United States susceptible to a foreign invasion from all sides (Sexton 99). British occupation of California would also have violated the noncolonization stated by the Monroe Doctrine. For these reasons, Polk aggressively declared war on Mexico and received California in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

Before 1846, Britain and the United States both had claims to the Oregon Territory. For the same motives of expansion and anticolonialism, Polk negotiated a treaty with Britain that divided the territory along the 49° line, the preexisting US-Canada border. Although Polk's campaign platform was to secure all of Oregon, he settled for a compromise to avoid another war with Britain. War would have led to entanglements with foreign powers, which the Monroe Doctrine sought to avoid.

Polk was the first President who used the Monroe Doctrine as a means of dealing with internal opposition as well as a guideline for foreign policy. Whigs tended to disagree with Polk's expansionist policy. They realized that annexing more territories would exacerbate the sectional conflict over slavery. Some Whigs even opted to allow Texas and California become independent republics (Sexton 101). By the time of Polk's presidency, the Monroe Doctrine had become a national symbol. James Monroe was a well-liked President; he missed a unanimous reelection by just one electoral vote

(Kennedy, Cohen, and Bailey 248). By associating his policies with those of Monroe, Polk inherited some of the popularity of his predecessor.

Polk reinforced the Monroe Doctrine in his own 1845 State of the Union address. Polk kept the general ideas originally detailed by Monroe, but he modified the Doctrine significantly to reflect his administration's goals.

Instead of applying to the entire Western Hemisphere, Polk's interpretation limited the scope of the Monroe Doctrine to North America. This was consistent with his expansionist ideas as well as Jackson's policy of staying out of Spanish American affairs. Polk rejected Peru's invitation to a Pan-American conference in 1847, and he did nothing when both Britain and France intervened in Argentina and Uruguay (Sexton 106).

Polk also stated that the United States would "apply greatly increased force" (qtd. in Sexton 105) against European colonization. Unlike back in 1823, when the United States was still a young nation, the country was now powerful enough to enforce the Monroe Doctrine. Instead of only prohibiting European colonization and intervention, the Monroe Doctrine now also called for American action in response to European aggression.

Polk added European attempts to create a "balance of power" (qtd. in Sexton 106) to the prohibited acts of colonization and intervention. Guizot, a French statesman, allegedly said that France did not want one power to control all of North America. Like Monroe, Polk avoided detailing exactly what constituted creating a "balance of power." Polk kept his interpretation flexible enough to support his active foreign policy (Sexton 106).

During his administration, Polk fulfilled all of his campaign promises and expanded the United States to the Pacific coast. However, this came at the cost of an aggressive foreign policy. Polk flirted with entangling foreign relations and ignited the sectional tensions that would lead to the Civil War.

Lincoln became President in 1861. He was part of the new Republican Party, which ardently supported abolition. Lincoln's election led to the secession of eleven Southern states, leading to the formation of the Confederate States of America.

The Confederacy differed from the Union not only on slavery, but also on the Monroe Doctrine. By splitting from the North and forming their own country, the Southern states challenged the Union's superiority in North America. The Confederacy depended on foreign intervention and alliances with Britain and France to win the Civil War. The South hoped that European nations would use the American Civil War to establish the "balance of power" by aiding the Confederacy (Sexton 138).

On the other hand, the Union basically adhered to the principles of the Monroe Doctrine. The Monroe Doctrine was conveniently in line with the Union cause. If the country were reunited, then the United States would remain the dominant power in America. Lincoln's administration also opposed foreign intervention that would assist the Confederacy. If the South managed to secure an alliance with Britain, the North could proceed to expand into Canada. Wanting to stay out of the American conflict, British Prime Minister Palmerston told the Confederacy, "We are adopting your Monroe Doctrine in our non-intervention" (Sexton 140).

At the same time as the Civil War, Mexico defaulted on its foreign loans. In response, France invaded Mexico and Napoleon III crowned Archduke Maximilian as a puppet monarch. This was the first time a European power actually challenged republicanism in America, the ideological conflict the original Monroe Doctrine wanted to avoid. The United States opposed French control of Mexico for economic and political reasons as well; before Maximilian's reign, the United States was able to exploit Mexico's weak government and secure favorable commercial treaties and border negotiations (Sexton 141).

Despite France's action being clearly contradictory to the Monroe Doctrine, Lincoln allowed the intervention. He acknowledged that European powers could intervene to collect debts from American countries. The Monroe Doctrine had developed into a call for an aggressive foreign policy. Lincoln realized that explicitly citing the Monroe Doctrine could possibly provoke France into fighting for the Confederacy (Sexton 148).

Lincoln and his cabinet actually never invoked the Monroe Doctrine publicly, even though they tended to follow it. Because of this, Democrats liked to accuse Lincoln of disregarding the Monroe Doctrine. They were especially wary of Lincoln's choice not to intervene in a French-controlled Mexico. In response to the Democrats' mudslinging, Republicans sought to reaffirm the Lincoln administration's allegiance to the Monroe Doctrine. Secretary of State Seward published correspondences with Mexico proving that Lincoln did not give in to French demands. Sumner, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, did not allow the Monroe Doctrine to be discussed in the Senate. Vice President Andrew Johnson gave a speech that showed his

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support for the Monroe Doctrine. In 1864, Davis's resolution denouncing the French in Mexico was the first Monroe Doctrine-based resolution to be passed by Congress (Sexton 153).

Lincoln's interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine's principles led to a looser enforcement of its ideas. Because of the Civil War, the United States was not capable of maintaining unstable Latin American politics, as was its responsibility earlier. Instead, Lincoln allowed some foreign powers to intervene instead.

The French eventually withdrew from Mexico. The United States had no influence on France's decision; it was the result of only Mexican and European opposition. Nevertheless, Americans claimed that the Monroe Doctrine was responsible for ousting the French. This was not the first time the Monroe Doctrine was credited for something it had no role in; Americans also asserted that it had also stopped the Holy Alliance's intervention back in 1823. Besides receiving credit for these two events, the Monroe Doctrine itself had little effect on the foreign policies of European powers (Sexton 157).

The Monroe Doctrine was a reoccurring theme throughout the 1800s. Even though James Monroe originally conceived it to deter European actions in the Western Hemisphere, the Monroe Doctrine grew into a nationalistic symbol calling for the United States' domination of the New World. Instead of attempting to prevent European infringements on the country's fragile national security of Monroe's administration, the Monroe Doctrine grew to advocate an active foreign policy to advance America's own national goals.

The Monroe Doctrine, now embodying the ideas of Monroe as well as those of Polk, Lincoln, and others, would continue to be a guiding principle for United States foreign policy into the twentieth century.

### The Significance of the Monroe Doctrine

The Monroe Doctrine was merely a statement of an ideal foreign policy. It became a symbol and a tradition. Presidents who referred to the Monroe Doctrine tended to gain public support. Whenever they wanted to pursue a goal that required an active foreign policy, they referenced the Monroe Doctrine to reinforce their policies. The Monroe Doctrine was never really a law and therefore was flexible, allowing for it to be reinterpreted by other Presidents. Adams used the Doctrine to establish the United States' supremacy in the New World. Calhoun used it to defend slavery. Jackson and Polk used it to expand the nation's territories. Lincoln went as far as allowing European intervention and colonization to secure the Union's victory in the Civil War. Later, Theodore Roosevelt issued the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine in his 1904 State of the Union Address. Roosevelt explicitly called for "the exercise of an international police power" (qtd. in Sexton 229). He wanted the United States to be more active in asserting its ideological, political, and economic goals. Roosevelt utilized America's growing strength, backing his declaration with military power.

The debate on the construction of a canal in Central America was also influenced by the Monroe Doctrine. The 1850 Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, which stated that Britain and the United States would jointly own the isthmian canal, seemed to flout the Monroe Doctrine by allowing British action in

America. President Grant wanted to take unilateral control of the future canal, but Fish, his Secretary of State, tried to work out another treaty with Britain. However, the new treaty violated Nicaragua's sovereignty, so Nicaragua rejected the offer (Sexton 170).

Later, a private French company led by Ferdinand de Lesseps once again tried to build an isthmian canal. Like the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, Lesseps was met with opposition in the United States because his enterprise allegedly violated the Monroe Doctrine. Lesseps argued his adherence to the Monroe Doctrine by claiming that he was part of a private company with no affiliation with the French government. However, a debate in Congress found private French ownership of the canal would transgress the terms of the Monroe Doctrine because of its "commercial interference" and would not allow Lesseps to build the canal. This argument came solely from the current American interests; the Monroe Doctrine actually never said anything about "commercial interference." Several other attempts to approve an isthmian canal, including the Frelinghuysen-Zavala Treaty, were unsuccessful. US-controlled construction of the Panama Canal would finally be started by Roosevelt in 1904 (Sexton 180).

The Monroe Doctrine served as the basis of American foreign policy for much of the nineteenth century. It did not actually accomplish anything and the initial tenets of noncolonization and nonintervention would be lost, but the Monroe Doctrine continued to have a significant impact in American politics. Through the reinterpretation of the Doctrine by Monroe's successors, the Monroe Doctrine evolved with United States foreign policy well past 1823.

## What If? #1

The Monroe Doctrine was never permanently established as law; it was constantly modified to fit the administration's needs. What if the Monroe Doctrine was never reinterpreted by later Presidents?

One of the most drastic changes to the Monroe Doctrine was Polk's Manifest Destiny. If Polk believed that the United States should also follow the idea of nonintervention, he would have had a much more passive foreign policy. The United States would have never fought the Mexican-American War, and Mexico would still own the entire Southwest. Polk would also have given most, if not all, of Oregon to Britain. He would not have bothered negotiating over the territory, which could have provoked the British into fighting another war. Without Polk's administration expanding the United States to the Pacific coast, the country would never have had the territory and resources needed to rise to the rank of a world power.

Another important modification to the Monroe Doctrine was Roosevelt's Corollary. This declared that the United States would take a more active role in international affairs. If the United States did not construct the Panama Canal or let another country build it, trade could not have flourished in the United States. This would lead to a higher risk of a financial crisis and hindered the economic growth of the nation.

An isolationist United States would have changed the outcome of the World Wars. The Allies defeated Germany only after the United States got involved. Without help from America, the Allies could have lost the war, and the fascist powers would have taken control of all of Europe. The United Nations would

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not have been formed without the involvement of the United States. The lack of a peacekeeping organization would lead to more wars among the major powers.

An active policy has been very critical recently. There have been several uprisings in Egypt and Syria, many of which involved violence. The UN helped ensure that the revolution would end relatively peacefully. Without foreign influence, Middle Eastern countries could be in complete anarchy right now.

What If? #2

During the Civil War, France installed a puppet monarchy in Mexico. If the United States had intervened to uphold the Monroe Doctrine, the Union would have lost the Civil War.

Lincoln originally allowed the French to stay in Mexico so that they would not be provoked to support the Confederacy. If the Union had intervened, the South could have gotten the foreign alliance it tried to get. If France allied itself with the Confederacy, Britain could have also been prompted to join the Confederate cause. Even though Britain was generally antislavery, it was dependent on the South's King Cotton.

If the Confederate states won their independence and formed a separate country, the two halves of the original United States would be in constant conflict. They would compete with each other for markets and alliances. America would not have become nearly as powerful if it were split.

In addition, there would still be slavery. This would create an extreme contrast between the societies of the North and the South. While the Union would be close to the modern American society, with near equality for everyone, the Confederacy would still be very racist and restrict the rights of many people. This disparity could have led to an ideological conflict like that of the Cold War.

## Summary

I wanted to learn more about the Monroe Doctrine because the textbook said that it had a large impact, even though it did not do anything. The textbook did not go much more in depth than that. I also remembered the Monroe Doctrine being a big deal in previous history classes. I wanted to learn how an ineffective proclamation could be so influential.

At first, I thought the Monroe Doctrine would be confined to just the period of Monroe's presidency, but I learned that it was applicable during later administrations as well. Although that forced me to do more work, learning about the foreign policy of many Presidents helped me understand the evolution of the Monroe Doctrine. It was not significant because it successfully deterred European intervention, but because it paved the road for the foreign policy of future Presidents.

One of the main problems I faced with doing my semester event on the Monroe Doctrine is the time frame. While the battles and Presidents' administrations occurred in specific times, the main usage of the Monroe Doctrine spanned from 1823 to Roosevelt in the early 1900s. Since the semester event was limited to the time before the end of the Civil War, I

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tried to focus more on the earlier events involving the Monroe Doctrine. This helped me see the trend of how the Monroe Doctrine changed. Instead of talking about all the times it was used, I focused on analyzing its evolution.

## Book Reviews

The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America, by Jay Sexton, was a very good book. I based most of my report off of this book. Sexton's book is quite comprehensive; he manages to address just about every time the Monroe Doctrine was used. This book is nicely organized. Each chapter is divided into sections, with each section detailing the policies of a certain person. It is mostly chronological, so it is easy to follow. Every once in a while, Sexton inserts a casual, interesting fact about a person, kind of like how Mr. Lewis gives his lectures. It was fun learning some random unrelated facts as well. However, Sexton sometimes rambles and talks about US foreign policy in general, not just how it relates to the Monroe Doctrine. He assumes that readers have studied American history already, and he often refers to events without explaining them. Overall, I would definitely recommend this book to future APUSH students.

Armin Rappaport's The Monroe Doctrine was not very helpful for my paper. It is a compilation of the works of historians from the late 1800s and early 1900s. Each part argues a certain part of the Monroe Doctrine, including its author, motives, and current relevance. Because the historians' intended audience was other historians, much of the language was too technical and sophisticated for me to understand. It has a lot of information on the causes of the Monroe Doctrine and how the Doctrine was received, but it tends to be

just unimportant material that does not really relate to the Monroe Doctrine.

I would not recommend this book.