

# TAHPDX: GREAT DECISIONS IN U.S. HISTORY

## (Teaching American History Project)

*A partnership between Portland State University and the Beaverton, Hillsboro and Forest Grove School Districts, funded by the U.S. Department of Education*

### **HISTORICAL TOPIC: The Monroe Doctrine (19<sup>th</sup> Century)**

On December 2, 1823 President James Monroe went to the Capitol and delivered one of the most pivotal addresses in the history of American foreign policy. As the leader of what they regarded as an upstart republic, Monroe's warning to the great powers of Europe to stay out of the new world was a brazen gesture. Behind it, however, was a broad calculus of the power relationships among those nations, the desire to nurture the embryonic republics of Latin America, and the sense—at least in the mind of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams—that the U.S. should strike a bold pose in international affairs. In fact, in light of Adams' intense lobbying for a unilateral American statement of principles on hemispheric affairs, perhaps the statement should be called the Adams Doctrine.

Reviewing the Monroe Doctrine allows us to examine closely the main currents of thought on the young nation's view of its own identity and its role in the world at this watershed moment in its history. It also provides the opportunity to discuss the roles of such luminaries as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the British foreign minister Lord Canning, and the international forces of the day that shaped the atmosphere surrounding Monroe's statement. In doing so, teachers can understand the mechanics of policy making, the pressures on leaders crafting strategy, and the long term ramifications of a momentous decision. The Monroe Doctrine is a particularly apt topic for teachers in this region because the American decision to issue this warning to the British and Europeans had a profound effect on the status of the Oregon country, a fact that can help them make the issue come alive for their students.

*The Monroe Doctrine topic contains the subtopics listed below. Each subtopic includes a narrative with highlighted text [**resources**] and notations indicating that additional support material is available for viewing and/or downloading including primary documents, maps, spreadsheet data and websites. To access the material go to the TAHPDX: Great Decisions in U.S. History Website and use the links available on the **TOPIC AREAS [Monroe Doctrine]** page or the **QUICK NAVIGATION** pages.*

Search TAHPDX on the internet or access the website via the link on the Community Geography page at <http://www.pdx.edu/ims/comgeo.html>.

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 Curriculum Units developed for this topic (download using the TAHPDX website):

[in process 2009]

## 1. Introduction

The Monroe Doctrine has a peculiar history. It did not attract a great deal of attention when President Monroe advanced it, in 1823, and it had little if any impact on diplomacy for the next couple of decades. As the United States pursued a policy of rapid expansion in the 1840s, however, the doctrine gained traction. Around the century's turn, as the nation became a global power, leaders frequently invoked the doctrine and even elaborated on it.

Many people inside and outside the United States have opposed the Monroe Doctrine. Isolationists have worried that it has committed the United States to be overly concerned with the politics of other nations. More liberal or radical anti-imperialists have rejected the doctrine's assumptions. Other global powers, from Victorian Great Britain to Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union, have interpreted the doctrine through their own political lenses. Latin American leaders have both resented and, at times, sought to utilize the doctrine.

These varied reactions to the doctrine have in large part been a reflection of the nation's unease with global politics. The United States has always viewed itself as exceptional, as operating above the sordid politics of self-interest and power. But the Monroe Doctrine expressed and has

been invoked to support this sense of exceptionalism. The Monroe Doctrine has therefore straddled the diplomacy of realism and the diplomacy of idealism. This flexibility and ambiguity have made for a history rich in paradox and irony.

## 2. Context

### *The American Revolution*

The American Revolution was a crucible in which its citizens forged a strong sense of identity and uniqueness even as they gained their independence. Patriots drew on British and Enlightenment traditions of liberty that Great Britain's leaders seemed to be straying from. The young United States therefore became, in the minds of its people, the new and improved source of *republicanism* [pdf resource], a beacon on a hill that would rally the entire world, given time, to republican principles of freedom and liberty.

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**PDF Resource:** *Republicanism* (from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/republicanism/>).

The nation's leaders believed that republics—states in which power ultimately resided in the people—depended on a virtuous citizenry willing to sacrifice personal interest for the greater good, embodied in patriots like George Washington who set aside individual preferences and comforts for the dangers and privations of national service.

There was more than a little truth to these beliefs. George Washington was a remarkable leader who refused the opportunity to seize absolute control of the young nation. The United States was also strengthened by thousands of anonymous citizens who joined or supported its army at great personal cost, sacrifices that played no small part in the upstart United States prevailing over the most powerful nation in the world.

But the young United States was also populated by draft dodgers, deserters, and plenty of cautious people who tried to steer clear of the conflict and its protagonists. The young nation's success owed much to a comparatively few—not to mention dumb luck, the intervention of the French, and British war weariness. But of course American patriots downplayed these crucial variables for more self-flattering explanations of their startling success. The United States entered the western world, then, with a strong sense of mission and moral superiority.

### *Relations with Spain*

Spain was, from the outset, wary of the United States. It did not sign the treaty of 1783 which ended the American Revolution, and it did not until 1795 recognize the boundaries established in that treaty or the right of the United States to navigate the Mississippi River. Indeed, one of the reasons that Spain sold the vast Louisiana territory to France in 1800 was that it expected France to provide a much stronger bulwark against United States expansion into its northern settlements than Spain itself could. It therefore felt betrayed when France just three years later sold

Louisiana to the United States, though its weak, dependent condition left it unable to overturn the sale. Bonaparte in fact invaded Spain in 1807.

Spain's fears were prescient. Thomas Jefferson, President from 1801 to 1809 and an ardent expansionist, expected the United States to gain Spanish territory in due time. "However our present interests may restrain us within our own limits," he wrote in 1801, "it is impossible not to look forward to distant times when our rapid multiplication will expand itself beyond those limits, and cover the whole northern, if not the whole southern continent." In 1810 the United States occupied the Spanish territory of West Florida (the Gulf Coast between the Mississippi River and present-day Florida), and in 1811 Congress anticipated the Monroe Doctrine by passing the *No-Transfer Resolution*, which asserted that "considering the influence which the destiny of the territory adjoining the southern border of the United States may have upon" its "security, tranquility, and commerce," it "cannot without serious inquietude see any part of the said territory pass into the hands of any foreign Power." Eight years later Spain, whose American empire was crumbling at the hands of revolutionaries, signed the *Adams-Onis treaty* [[pdf & map resource](#)] transferring the Floridas to the United States and setting up a more precise boundary between what would soon become Mexico and the United States, a boundary that of course would not prove to be durable.

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**PDF/Map Resource:** *Adams-Onis Treaty* of 1819.

### *Latin American Independence*

The United States walked a fine line in reacting to the revolutions breaking out across Latin America in the 1810s and 1820s. On the one hand, the young nation liked to see itself as the incubator of republicanism and freedom. The French Revolution had taken an authoritarian turn, but most people in the United States who gave the matter much thought believed that monarchy and imperial rule were bound for extinction. The House of Representatives in 1811 expressed "a friendly solicitude in the welfare of" those seeking independence from Spain, "and a readiness, when they should become nations by the exercise of their rights," of joining President Madison "in establishing such relations with them as might be necessary." The United States sold arms to and offered refuge to Latin American revolutionaries.

But American leaders felt the revolutions might also bring turmoil. Several powerful European monarchies had reacted strongly to the French Revolution and might aid Spain in putting down these revolutions—and establish a much stronger European presence in Latin America while they were at it, a presence that could threaten the territorial and economic ambitions of the United States. On the other hand, full and consequential support of the revolutionaries risked bringing the wrath of powerful nations, particularly Great Britain. John Quincy Adams, writing from London in 1816, warned that "to join the cause of South America, and consequently be engaged in a war with Spain," would exacerbate British "jealousies and national antipathies" and prompt the British to join Spain "merely because the United States would be on the other side."

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**Web/Map Resource:** Wikipedia has an informative animated map series that shows the progression of European colonization and independence of Central and South American countries from 1700 to present.

Central America:

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Political\\_Evolution\\_of\\_Central\\_America\\_and\\_the\\_Caribbean\\_1700\\_and\\_on.gif](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Political_Evolution_of_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_1700_and_on.gif).

South America: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Non-Native\\_American\\_Nations\\_Control\\_over\\_South\\_America\\_1700\\_and\\_on.gif](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Non-Native_American_Nations_Control_over_South_America_1700_and_on.gif).

### ***Prejudice***

Leaders in the United States would no doubt have reacted more enthusiastically to Latin American struggles for independence if they had possessed a higher opinion of Latin Americans. Much of this prejudice was rooted in race. Whites associated dark skin with savagery and ignorance, and travelers from the United States to Latin America frequently commented on the high proportion of people there with African and particularly Native American ancestry.

But they also objected to the culture of Latin America and Latins in general. John Adams rejoiced upon leaving Spain for France in the winter of 1779-1780, “for every Thing here [in France] was clean, sweet and comfortable in Comparison of any Thing We had found in any part of Spain.” His twelve-year-old son John Quincy, who would play a critical role in formulating the Monroe Doctrine, described the Spanish as “lazy, dirty, nasty” people who “are eat up by their priests.” Jefferson, likewise, dismissed Latin Americans as a “priest-ridden people” unlikely or unable to create functional republics. An influential observer in 1821 concluded: “We have no concern with South America; we have no sympathy with them. We are spring from different stocks, we speak different languages, we have been brought up in different social and moral schools, we have been governed by different codes of law, we profess radically different codes of religion...”

## **3. Creating the Monroe Doctrine**

### ***Isolationism***

President Monroe was the first outside of Latin America to recognize several of the new Latin American governments. But he did so with great care. Isolationism ran deep in the United States. From the start, as we have seen, the young nation regarded itself as operating on a higher moral plane than the nations of “degraded” Europe. Moreover, the Atlantic Ocean seemed to offer a capacious buffer against the military might of Europe. President Washington’s Farewell Address of 1796 had warned against forming permanent alliances with European nations, and President Jefferson had also counseled against “entangling alliances.”

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**PDF Resource:** *American Isolationism* (<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1601.html>).

### ***Monroe and Adams***

Washington and Jefferson, to be sure, were realists who understood the necessity of diplomacy. But President James Monroe was more concerned with European relations than were most leaders of the United States. He believed, in the words of historian Ernest R. May, “that

Americans should do whatever they could to make Europeans see the United States as a nation of consequence, deserving to be both feared and courted.” He therefore favored a strong military and active diplomacy.

Monroe’s Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, shared Monroe’s practical and pragmatic approach to foreign affairs. He opposed European colonization not simply because he found it repugnant and exploitive, but also because it so often excluded the United States from foreign markets. Though he shared his father’s belief in the importance of acting virtuously in public service, the younger Adams was also ambitious for the presidency (which he would gain in the highly contested election of 1824) and realized that a grand declaration of republican principles vis-à-vis Latin America could enhance his reputation along with his nation’s.

### *Common Enemies*

Great Britain and the United States alike were concerned over the ***Holy Alliance: Russia, France, Austria, and Prussia*** [pdf resource]. These nations in the early 1820s asserted that they had a responsibility to destroy revolutions and restore monarchies. Where people like Jefferson saw republican promise, they discerned anarchy, the dissolution of western civilization and order. After helping to restore the Spanish monarchy they turned their attentions to its rebellious colonies in Latin America. Returning these aspiring states to Spain’s control would both buttress the cause of absolutism and the commercial interests of the Holy Alliance. Indeed, Russia was by 1821 seeking to expand its trade southwards from Alaska and had asserted a trade monopoly for the Pacific coast of North America north of 51 degrees. Great Britain remained committed to free trade in the Americas and favored a Latin America governed and controlled by weak Latin American nations rather than its European enemies. The United States had less riding on the state of European politics but had reason to fear European expansion into any part of the Americas.

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**PDF Resource:** *The Holy Alliance*. Information, images and translation (from the Russian Nobility Association in America at <http://www.russiannobility.org/>).

### *Diplomacy*

Diplomacy in this instance entailed working closely with Great Britain. Great Britain, like the United States, feared that powerful enemies—particularly France—might use the political instability of Spanish America to insert themselves forcefully into the region. Great Britain therefore sought the agreement of the United States in issuing a joint statement asserting that the western powers should neither interfere in the wars of independence in Spanish America nor seek to gain any territory from those wars.

The United States ultimately refused this overture. "It would be more candid, as well as more dignified, to avow our principles explicitly to Russia and France, than to come in as a cockboat in the wake of the British man-of-war," argued Adams in a cabinet meeting. But the Monroe administration was reluctant to get too far out in front of Great Britain. It wished the United States to appear autonomous from Great Britain without making any moves that would alienate the great power. Hence they had not recognized the independence of Latin American nations

until it was clear both that the revolutions had succeeded and that Great Britain also intended to recognize them.

### ***The Monroe Doctrine***

A collaborative effort of Adams and Monroe, the ***Monroe Doctrine*** [pdf resource] was imbedded in Monroe's message to Congress in December 1823. It drew a thick line, a strong distinction, between the Americas and Europe. President Monroe asserted that "the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers." The United States would not interfere with existing colonies, but if any European power interposed itself on "Governments who have declared their independence and maintained it," the United States would regard such interpositions "as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States."

By the same token: "In the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken any part, nor does it comport with our policy so to do." The United States did not intend to "interfere in the internal concerns of any" European "powers," would simply strive "to cultivate friendly relations with it, and to preserve those relations by a frank, firm, and manly policy, meeting in all instances the just claims of every power, submitting to injuries from none." This statement comforted isolationists who wished the United States to stay clear of European entanglements.

Monroe's address drew a strong contrast between the modes of government employed in absolutist Europe and republican America. The United States would not seek to disturb the absolutist states of Europe (an attempt which Adams had pointed out would likely bring calamity to the young nation), and it expected Europe to act with like restraint in the Americas.

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**PDF Resource:** *The Monroe Doctrine*. Contains informative narrative and quotes from Monroe's address (from the U.S. Department of State at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/jd/16321.htm>).

**Web Resource:** A complete transcription of Monroe's address can be found at Infoplease (<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0900137.html>).

### ***Analysis***

It is crucial to remember that the Monroe Doctrine sprang from a particular context, from global events and diplomatic negotiations that had to do with the creation of new nations in Latin America and how powerful European nations were reacting to that process. Stripped of its rhetoric and obfuscations, the doctrine was essentially a declaration of spheres of influence. The United States would brook no interference in the political integrity of Latin American nations and pledged to live by the same rules regarding European politics.

President Monroe and John Quincy Adams of course did not anticipate a day in which Latin American reformers and revolutionaries would seize the property of citizens or companies of the United States, let alone circumstances in which the United States would hold in its hands the

capacity to tip the balance in Europe during two world wars. The Monroe Doctrine was designed to keep European powers from overthrowing the new Latin American nations, to give the appearance of American strength to those European powers without prompting them to try their own considerable strength against the United States—and of course to burnish the domestic reputations of a retiring (Monroe) and a hopeful (Adams) president. The Monroe Doctrine succeeded on all three accounts—but soon receded from memory as the political landscape shifted.

## 4. The Monroe Doctrine in Practice: The 19<sup>th</sup> Century

### *Reaction in Latin America*

Most Latin Americans—revolutionary or otherwise—looked more to Europe than to the United States. Great Britain was the pre-eminent commercial power in the world, and the ideologues of the Latin American revolutions were inspired more by the European Enlightenment than by the American Revolution. Indeed, many Latin American leaders were more conservative than their counterparts in the United States and feared that a republic on the model of the United States would be too radical, would distribute power to masses of poor and likely dangerous people.

Few Latin Americans paid much attention to the Monroe Doctrine. George Canning, the British foreign minister who had been working with the United States to issue a joint statement, rightly perceived the doctrine as constituting something of a personal snub, and he undercut its importance by asserting that he had “called the New World into existence to redress the imbalance of the old.” Indeed, President John F. Kennedy would note in 1963 that “it was not the Monroe Doctrine that kept all Europe away from this hemisphere—it was the strength of the British fleet and the width of the Atlantic Ocean.” Most of the Latin American press ignored Monroe’s assertions. A few leaders saw in the doctrine the possibility of making alliances with the United States, including treaties of mutual defense. But the United States turned away these overtures. The doctrine had been designed to shape public opinion in the United States and Europe, not Latin America. Simon Bolivar, one of South America’s pre-eminent revolutionaries, had complained in 1819 that the United States were “but passive spectators of our anguish,” and when he called a Pan-American congress in 1826 he did not initially invite the United States.

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**PDF Resource:** *Pan-Americanism and the Pan-American Conferences* (Source: US Foreign Policy Encyclopedia). An excellent narrative about the changing relationship between the U.S. and Latin America from the 1700s to present day.

### *Prejudice and Tension*

Nor was the United States much impressed by the new Latin American nations, most of which were plagued by political instability and economic difficulties. Part of this indifference lay in the fact that U.S. manufacturing lagged well behind Great Britain’s in the 1820s and 1830s and commerce between the United States and Latin America remained modest.

People in the United States continued to hold very negative views of Latin Americans and commonly depicted them as wanton, inebriated, hot-headed, disorderly, poor, Catholic, and—

especially—lazy. Wrote an observer in California in the 1840s: Nature [was] doing everything, man [was] doing nothing.” A trapper from the United States referred to Mexicans as “depraved, indolent, untrustworthy, dishonest, cowardly, servile, ignorant, superstitious, and dirty.” That the United States treated Latin American people and nations with such patent disrespect of course did nothing to dispel pan-American tensions. A diplomat from the United States in Argentina observed in 1847 that the populace there viewed the Mexican War “as one of mere conquest, and as an act of the grossest and most cruel oppression.”

### ***European Reaction***

Taken at face value, the Monroe Doctrine bordered on absurdity at the time it was issued. European nations still controlled several parts of Latin America, and much of North America and all of South America lay outside the direct control of the United States. The young nations of Latin America might develop governments organized along the republican principals alluded to in the doctrine, but in 1823 that remained to be seen.

Canning, as we have seen, worked behind the scenes to defuse the impact of the Monroe Doctrine. Indeed, the statement had little visible impact in Europe. Most statesmen simply ignored it. They viewed the United States as a minor power and tread lightly in Latin America more from fear of Great Britain than the United States.

England and France not only ignored the Monroe Doctrine; they violated it. England, for example, forced Brazil to accept Uruguay’s independence later in the 1820s, took over the Falkland Islands in 1833, and expanded their authority in Belize. The French occupied the Mexican port of Vera Cruz in 1838. During the Civil War several European nations occupied Vera Cruz when Mexico stopped paying its debts, and Napoleon III set up a French monarchy in Mexico for several years.

### ***Manifest Destiny***

Dexter Perkins, the doctrine’s most prolific historian, observes that “Monroe probably never intended to proclaim a doctrine at all.” Indeed, Monroe’s remarks were not interpreted as containing a “doctrine” until years later, and the Monroe Doctrine was not widely discussed until President Polk and other expansionists invoked it in the 1840s as part of their attempts to keep Europe out of Texas and California on the eve of the Mexican War. Polk had been elected in 1844 on a platform of expansion. The term “*manifest destiny*” [**pdf resource**] had emerged to articulate the belief that the United States was divinely ordained or fated to expand to the Pacific Ocean, to seize at least the northern half of Mexico and the Oregon Country. Polk watered down the concept a bit in asserting that “the people of this continent alone have the right to decide their own destiny.” But he soon followed this statement by precipitating a war with Mexico to gain much of its land without consulting with Mexicans who lived on that land.

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**PDF Resource:** John L. O’Sullivan on *Manifest Destiny*, 1839.

What struck many observers—including some in the United States such as Abraham Lincoln and Henry Thoreau—as hypocritical and immoral disturbed most citizens very little. The editor of a

New York paper explained during the war “that our victories will give liberty, safety, and prosperity to the vanquished.” Indeed, several filibusters brought private forces from the United States to Latin America—usually southerners hoping to extend the slave-holding territory of the United States. These sorts of forays were not at all what Monroe and Adams had in mind when they formulated the Monroe Doctrine. But the doctrine’s implication of United States hegemony invited broad applications.

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**PDF Resources on the Mexican War:**

Abraham Lincoln Speech on the *War with Mexico* (from the Collected works of Abraham Lincoln).  
Henry David Thoreau on *Civil Disobedience* (from The Thoreau Reader).

United States policy after the Mexican War was more circumspect. The *Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850* [web resource], for example, established that any canal built in Central America would be fully controlled by neither the United States or Great Britain, a stipulation that some in the United States criticized as a retreat from the Monroe Doctrine.

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**Web Resource:** Text of the *Clayton-Bulwer Treaty* can be found on the Avalon Law Project website ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/br1850.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/br1850.asp)).

### ***The Monroe Doctrine and the Oregon Country***

The United States had negotiated an agreement of joint occupation of the Oregon Country after the War of 1812 and before the enunciation of the Monroe Doctrine, so the doctrine had little bearing on United States policy regarding the Pacific Northwest. The awakening of Manifest Destiny in the 1840s, as we have seen, prompted a sort of re-discovery, re-interpretation and embrace of the Monroe Doctrine by the general public. But the doctrine seemed more applicable to California, where Great Britain and France might be trying to gain control from Mexico, than in the Oregon Country, where the United States was simply trying to re-negotiate a long-standing treaty with Great Britain.

### ***Emergence as a Global Power***

Not until late in the nineteenth century did the foreign policy of the United States again repeatedly invoke the language of the Monroe Doctrine. The United States inserted itself in a boundary dispute between British Guiana and Venezuela. Secretary of State Richard Olney proclaimed: “The United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition.” British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury tartly replied: “The Government of the United States is not entitled to affirm as a universal proposition, with reference to a number of independent States for whose conduct it assumes no responsibility, that its interests are necessarily concerned in whatever may befall those States, simply because they are situated in the Western Hemisphere.” But a pamphlet entitled “*British Aggressions in Venezuela and the Monroe Doctrine on Trial*” [pdf resource] roused public opinion, and the British accepted arbitration rather than risk war with the United States.

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**PDF Resource:** *British Aggressions in Venezuela and the Monroe Doctrine* on Trial by William L. Scruggs (available in pdf form from Google Digital Books).

President Theodore Roosevelt was a key figure in the nation's rising international stature, as he favored a stronger Navy, coaling stations across the globe for that Navy, the expansion of the nation's markets and even territory, and control of a canal in Central America. The Spanish-American War of 1898 brought Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines into the American orbit, and once Roosevelt became president he helped the Republic of Panama win its independence from Columbia so that the United States could build a canal there. "I do not think that the Bogota lot of jack rabbits [whom he also referred to as "inefficient bandits"] should be allowed permanently to bar one of the future highways of civilization," he wrote his Secretary of State. Indeed, the ***Roosevelt Corollary*** extended the Monroe Doctrine: "Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power." In other words, if disorder in a Latin American country seemed to invite intervention from a nation other than the United States, the United States had a right to put the Latin American nation's house in order.

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**PDF Resource:** *The Roosevelt Corollary and the Monroe Doctrine* (from the Theodore Roosevelt Association).

**Web Resource:** For more of Roosevelt's writing and speeches on the Monroe Doctrine visit the Theodore Roosevelt Association website (<http://www.theodoreroosevelt.org/life/rooseveltcorollary.htm>).

**PDF Resource:** *Theodore Roosevelt and the Panama Canal* (from Western Virginia Community College at <http://www.vw.vccs.edu/vwhansd/his122/Teddy/TRCanal.html>). A short narrative about Roosevelt's involvement in the Panamanian Revolt and the Building of the Panama Canal.

### ***Latin American Reaction***

Such pronouncements were extremely unpopular in Latin America. Cuban patriots who had risked their lives fighting the Spanish were enraged that the United States withheld independence from them. Uruguayan writer José Enrique Rodó remarked that the United States was a sort of monster that abused its great strength. Despite its "titanic accomplishments" and "its incomparable triumphs in all spheres of material success," its "civilization creates a singular impression of insufficiency and emptiness." Nicaraguan poet Ruben Darío observed that when the United States "trembles, a profound shudder runs down the enormous backbone of the Andes." Argentina, with much of its population originating in Europe and its strong economic ties to that continent, particularly resented United States hegemony and vanity.

## 5. The Monroe Doctrine in Practice: The 20<sup>th</sup> Century

### *Continued Interventions*

Though subsequent presidents spoke much less bluntly than Theodore Roosevelt had, the United States continued to intervene regularly in Latin America through the 1920s, and the Monroe Doctrine remained popular.

President Woodrow Wilson often articulated a moralistic program toward Latin America, renouncing conquest and expressing much concern over its economic progress. But he also projected a strong sense of superiority and intervened frequently in the affairs of Mexico when the people of that nation overthrew Porfirio Diaz, its long-time dictator in 1910. Wilson refused to accept Mexico's new leader, Victoriano Huerta, and he occupied Vera Cruz when Huerta refused to apologize for arresting sailors from the United States who had gone ashore in Mexico. Substantial numbers of troops from the United States were soon deep in Mexico chasing Pancho Villa, a revolutionary leader whose raids sometimes crossed into the United States. Mexico must "take help if needed," Wilson explained. Much of the public of the United States, troubled by the Mexican Revolution's anti-clericalism and nationalization of foreign-owned businesses, agreed.

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**Web Resource:** PBS "The Border." This website contains an interactive timeline with links to key events highlighting the relationship of the United States and Mexico (<http://www.pbs.org/kpbs/theborder/>). Links also include President Woodrow Wilson's intervention in the Mexican Revolution.

The end of World War I saw the creation of the League of Nations and an expansion of global economic power on the part of the United States. Latin American nations joined the league, and the United States did not. But Latin Americans were disappointed in their hopes that the league would curb the power of the United States in Latin America. The re-occupation of Nicaragua by the United States in 1926 prompted a great deal of criticism in Latin America, particularly from Mexico, and the Nicaraguan patriot Augusto Sandino became a hero across much of Latin America for resisting the United States.

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**PDF Resource:** NY Times Article, 2/8/1920, "*Monroe Doctrine Definition Asked.*" An interesting article from the times that discusses the request by the Salvadorean Government for Woodrow Wilson to define the Monroe Doctrine as it is used in the League of Nations Covenant (Article XXI), citing a lack of a clear understanding of what constitutes U.S. interest and intervention in the Americas.

### *The Good Neighbor Policy*

By the 1930s, it was clear that Europe was very unlikely to seek additional colonies in Latin America. Herbert Hoover had undertaken a goodwill tour of ten Latin American nations in 1928, shortly before taking office, and repudiated the Roosevelt Corollary. He also withdrew from Nicaragua. President Franklin D. Roosevelt renounced "arbitrary intervention in the home affairs of our neighbors" and lowered tariffs (taxes on other nations' goods) that had long rankled Latin American leaders. Progressives like John Collier, the Commissioner of Indian

Affairs under Franklin D. Roosevelt, criticized the bald racism and ethnocentrism of the past and saw much to praise in Mexican culture. As depression and war discredited western civilization's presumption of superiority, at least some educated people found it more difficult to justify marginalizing and dominating poorer nations. In 1943 Vice President Henry Wallace traveled to Peru to wax enthusiastically about Incan Civilization, concluding that people in the United States thought of Peru as a "fountain of inspiration" for political and economic equality. A series of pan-American conventions in the 1930s expressed hemispheric solidarity without explicitly privileging the United States.

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**PDF Resource:** *The Good Neighbor Policy*. A short narrative describing the various iterations of the Good Neighbor Policy from Hoover to present day (from US History.com).

### ***World War II***

The war brought a more concerted attempt by the United States to control Latin America. More than 100,000 troops went to Latin America and some FBI agents, too. The United States did not succeed in getting Argentina or Chile to cut their ties with the Nazis, and both the Nazis and Japan made the embarrassing and maddening (for the United States) argument that their programs of national expansion or imperialism were essentially their own versions of the Monroe Doctrine, that the United States had no more right to object to them than they did to the many interventions of the United States in Central America.

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**PDF Resource:** NY Times, 2/28/1915, "*Japan has a Monroe Doctrine*." An interesting article by W. Morgan Shuster about Japan's interventionist policies in the Far East and Pacific region (particularly with reference to the Philippines).

**PDF Resource:** Ching-Chun Wang, 1936, "Theodore Roosevelt and Japan's Monroe Doctrine." *Pacific Affairs* 9(1): 86-91.

### ***Cold War***

Relations between the United States and Latin America at first languished after World War II as the United States poured much of its resources into reconstructing Europe. The ***Organization of American States*** [web resource] formed in 1948 and explicitly rejected interventionism. Latin American leaders sought economic aid from the United States and argued that their nations should be encouraged or at least allowed to industrialize rather than to continue to provide raw materials to industrialized nations in general and the United States in particular.

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**Web Resource:** The Organization of American States (<http://www.oas.org/>).

But these broader developments were soon overshadowed by the polarization of much of the world between the United States and a resurgent Soviet Union. The Monroe Doctrine had been invoked to exclude Europe from the Americas in the colonialistic aspirations of the nineteenth century. Now the Soviet Union and communism threatened to "invade" the western hemisphere. Nor did the leaders of the United States profess much trust in the capacity of Latin Americans to

resist communism. George Kennan, an extremely influential architect of the nation's foreign policy, argued after visiting Latin America in 1950 that the United States would have to shore up harsh, repressive governments there or risk losing nations to communism, as Latin Americans were unlikely to create strong democracies.

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**PDF Resource:** *Kennan Report on Latin America*. A short synopsis and transcript of the controversial secret memorandum from George Kennan to the Secretary of State following his trip to Latin America in 1950.

Of course many Latin American leaders resented and resisted these opinions. Some nations, such as Argentina, articulated a third, independent way, and Vice President Nixon confronted a great deal of sentiment against the United States when he visited Latin America in 1958. But in practice it was very difficult to buck the United States. The United States played a critical role in overthrowing a leftist government in Guatemala in 1954 and sponsored the Bay of Pigs debacle in an attempt to overthrow Castro's young government in 1961.

### ***Retreat***

In some respects, the United States had retreated from the Monroe Doctrine when it asserted that Latin Americans were incapable of creating effective democracies. The original Monroe Doctrine, after all, had contrasted a republican western hemisphere against an authoritarian European one. By the 1950s the United States was essentially arguing that it had to save Latin Americans from themselves, that the choice was not between absolutism on the one hand and republicanism and democracy on the other, but between Communism and anything but Communism, including brutal dictatorships (as long as they were not endorsed or financed by the Soviet Union).

But it was the Cuban Missile Crisis that marked a more formal abandonment of the Monroe Doctrine. The Kennedy administration indeed succeeded in convincing the Soviet Union to remove missiles from Cuba. But in so doing it pledged not to invade a nation that had clearly aligned itself with an outside and patently hostile power. Conservatives decried this concession. "The Monroe Doctrine, which every Member of this body was taught as a child in school is as sacred to the American tradition as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence," asserted an Arizona congressman. Kennedy, as we have seen, countered that the doctrine was intended for a particular historical context that no longer applied.

Cuba remained a sore spot for the United States. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress touted economic development in Latin America as an antidote to Communism. Presidents Johnson and Nixon vowed that there would be "no more Cubas" in Latin America, and they continued to cooperate with brutal dictators who opposed communism. "Democracy is a very subtle and difficult problem" for Latinos, explained liberal Republican Nelson Rockefeller in 1969. Hence the United States played a crucial role in the overthrow of President Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973. Such attitudes and actions continued to discredit the United States among progressive, let alone radical, Latin Americans.

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**PDF Article Resource:** Wilson, Larman C. May 1966. "The Monroe Doctrine, Cold War Anachronism: Cuba and the Dominican Republic." *The Journal of Politics* 28(2): 322-46.

**PDF Resource:** TIME Magazine, 9/21/1962, "*The Durable Doctrine.*" An insightful and interesting magazine piece about John F. Kennedy's "Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine" in response to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Describes in detail the formation of the original Monroe Doctrine and contains numerous references to various interpretations of the Monroe Doctrine by governmental leaders throughout time.

### ***Reagan Revival***

President Reagan refurbished the Monroe Doctrine in the 1980s as part of his program of re-asserting national pride and strength. Conservative William F. Buckley, Jr., co-founder of the Committee for the Monroe Doctrine, lamented that the doctrine was now "a fugitive term, used only with some embarrassment by historians required to teach atavistic United States diplomacy." He was cheered by Reagan's unapologetic embrace of United States hegemony in the western hemisphere. But although the invasion of Grenada was well received at home, a large fraction of the United States public was disturbed by the machinations of the Iran-Contra affair that uncovered the highly unscrupulous means by which the United States had tried to overthrow the Sandinistas of Nicaragua.

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**PDF Resource:** TIME Magazine, 4/1/1985, "*The Reagan Doctrine.*" An easy to read opinion piece about the "Reagan Doctrine" and how it relates to ideas about the Monroe Doctrine and international intervention.

### ***Aftermath***

The fall of the Sandinistas coupled with disillusionment over how it was accomplished, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the spread of free trade agreements to Mexico and other parts of Latin America, and the emergence of Islamic terrorists all combined to lower the perceived threats to and the relevance of the Monroe Doctrine. Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush were less concerned with external influences to Latin America than with its internal politics, particularly as related to the expanding drug trade.

Indeed, the most heated debates in the United States regarding Latin America today are over the impact of manufacturing jobs leaving the United States and, especially, the so-called "browning" of the United States as millions of Mexicans and other Latin Americans seek prosperity in the United States. The Monroe Doctrine asserted the distinctiveness of the Western Hemisphere vis-à-vis Europe and assumed the pre-eminence of the United States. By the turn of the twenty-first century it had become clear that in many respects the Americas were becoming more homogenous not so much by the spread of the political system of the United States as by the spread of Latin Americans to the United States, an eventuality certainly not anticipated by Monroe or Adams.

## 6. Enduring Questions

### *Was the Monroe Doctrine inevitable?*

The Monroe Doctrine's actual creation owed much to historical circumstance, to the twists and turns of complex historical developments in the early 1820s. But would something very like the Monroe Doctrine have developed later in the nineteenth century, as the United States became convinced that it was its Manifest Destiny to spread at least to the Pacific Ocean? Did the Monroe Doctrine play a crucial role in encouraging these later beliefs?

### *Has the Monroe Doctrine been a tool of idealists or cynics?*

Leaders and particularly the general public in the United States have tended to interpret their national history through an idealized lens, to assume or to assert that their nation is and has always been uniquely moral and virtuous. From the perspective of the rest of the world, the United States has exercised power like any other nation—aside from its vexing trait of being unwilling to admit as much.

Hence the United States has tended to perceive the Monroe Doctrine as a sort of paternalistic gift to the rest of the western hemisphere, a noble means to keep Latin American nations free from meddling outsiders. For many Latin Americans, however, the United States has been the principal meddling outsider, and the Monroe Doctrine has simply constituted a justification for assuming hemispheric control whenever it has served the interests of the United States.

Would the United States—and the rest of the world—have been better off if the United States admitted that its foreign policy has been shaped largely by self-interest rather than moral obligation?

### *What is the Historical or Enduring Significance of the Monroe Doctrine?*

The Monroe Doctrine has been used in much different ways over time, for very different purposes from what it was designed for, in part because it is an artifact of the context in which it was formulated—a time when the western hemisphere lay much farther away from the rest of the world than it would in the days of air travel, intercontinental missiles, the radio, the internet, television, and a global economy. The United States departed from the Monroe Doctrine in participating in World Wars I and II and in armed interventions in the Middle East even as it has consented, albeit often with great reluctance, to greater political penetration of the Americas by outsiders.

But, nevertheless, does the Monroe Doctrine still hold considerable symbolic power? Does it continue to resonate with people in the United States who believe that the nation is—through divine intervention or not—uniquely virtuous and unselfish in its motives and actions, that its diplomacy, like its history, lays outside the boundaries of ordinary rules of human conduct? Or is it simply an instrument by which we seek to exercise power through invoking historical precedent?

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