Document No. 3. The Monroe Doctrine

President James Monroe, excerpt from seventh annual message to Congress, December 2, 1823

In 1823 President James Monroe laid out a policy in his State of the Union address to Congress that rejected European expansion in the Western Hemisphere. Although he developed the policy for the immediate purpose of discouraging Russian land claims in the Pacific Northwest, it became more important as a means of blocking attempts by both the Spanish Crown to regain its former colonies and the British government to extend its influence in the region. Applauded at the time by many Latin American politicians and intellectuals as a sign that the United States would defend their independence and autonomy, it later became a justification for U.S. policymakers to interfere in the national affairs of their neighbors to the south.

... At the proposal of the Russian Imperial Government, made through the minister of the Emperor residing here, a full power and instructions have been transmitted to the Minister of the United States at St. Petersburg to arrange, by amicable negotiation, the respective rights and interests of the two nations on the northwest coast of this continent. A similar proposal has been made by His Imperial Majesty to the Government of Great Britain, which has likewise been acceded to. The Government of the United States has been desirous, by this friendly proceeding, of manifesting the great value which they have invariably attached to the friendship of the Emperor, and their solicitude to cultivate the best understanding with his Government. In the
discussions to which this interest has given rise, and in the arrangements by which they may terminate the occasion has been judged proper for asserting, as a principle in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, 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. . . .

It was stated at the commencement of the last session that a great effort was then making in Spain and Portugal, to improve the condition of the people of those countries, and that it appeared to be conducted with extraordinary moderation. It need scarcely be remarked, that the result has been, so far, very different from what was then anticipated. Of events in that quarter of the globe, with which we have so much intercourse, and from which we derive our origin, we have always been anxious and interested spectators. The citizens of the United States cherish sentiments the most friendly, in favor of the liberty and happiness of their fellow men on that side of the Atlantic. 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 to do so. It is only when our rights are invaded, or seriously menaced, that we resent injuries, or make preparation for our defense. With the movements in this hemisphere, we are, of necessity, more immediately connected, and by causes which must be obvious to all enlightened and impartial observers. The political system of the allied powers is essentially different, in this respect, from that of America. This difference proceeds from that which exists in their respective governments. And to the defense of our own, which has been achieved by the loss of so much blood and treasure, and matured by the wisdom of their most enlightened citizens, and under which we have enjoyed unexampled felicity, this whole nation is devoted. 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. With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power 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 towards the United States.
In the war between those new governments and Spain we declared our neutrality at the time of
their recognition, and to this we have adhered, and shall continue to adhere, provided no change
shall occur, which, in the judgment of the competent authorities of this government, shall make a
corresponding change, on the part of the United States, indispensable to their security.

The late events in Spain and Portugal [show] that Europe is still unsettled. Of this
important fact, no stronger proof can be adduced than that the allied powers should have thought
it proper, on any principle satisfactory to themselves, to have interposed, by force, in the internal
concerns of Spain. To what extent such interposition may be carried, on the same principle, is a
question, to which all independent powers, whose governments differ from theirs, are interested;
even those most remote, and surely none more so than the United States. Our policy, in regard to
Europe, which was adopted at an early stage of the wars which have so long agitated that quarter
of the globe, nevertheless remains the same, which is, not to interfere in the internal concerns of
any of its powers; to consider the government *de facto* as the legitimate government for us; 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.
But, in regard to these continents, circumstances are eminently and conspicuously different. It is
impossible that the allied powers should extend their political system to any portion of either continent, without endangering our peace and happiness: nor can any one believe that our Southern Brethren, if left to themselves, would adopt it of their own accord. It is equally impossible, therefore, that we should behold such interposition, in any form, with indifference. If we look to the comparative strength and resources of Spain and those new governments, and their distance from each other, it must be obvious that she can never subdue them. It is still the true policy of the United States to leave the parties to themselves, in the hope that other powers will pursue the same course. . . .

Suggestions for Further Reading


