

Adams' Community Of Principle: The Monroe Doctrine

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John Quincy Adams, the son of Founding Father John Adams, and the intellectual heir of Benjamin Franklin, played a pivotal role in defining the foreign policy of the young United States. His concept for that policy flowed directly from his belief that the United States of America was founded upon principles which were derived from the Christian religion,¹ and that the United States should preserve and extend those principles, without any compromise with imperial or colonial powers, and without becoming an imperial power itself.

During his tenure as Secretary of State, under the Monroe Administrations, Adams produced an abundance of memoranda and speeches which defined his view of American foreign policy, especially around the period of the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, and the formulation of the Monroe Doctrine (1823). The events around preparing these two documents show that Adams was fully committed to creating a continental republic based on anti-colonial principles, and that he based his idea of international alliances upon the concept of a *community of principle* with fellow sovereign republics.

According to Samuel Flagg Bemis, a leading 20th-Century historian, Adams's diplomatic history defines him as a, if not the, leading protagonist of what became known later as "Manifest Destiny." But while the specific coiners of that phrase, notably John O'Sullivan of New York,² used it to justify merely a land grab, including President James Polk's war with Mexico (1846-48), Adams and his faction insisted that the westward expansion of the United States not result in the spread of slavery, or conquest of other lands, but rather the extension of republicanism as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Adams opposed the Mexican war, and was prepared to dump his continental aspirations, if necessary, if it meant the expansion of slavery.

1. See "An Oration Delivered Before the Inhabitants of the Town of Newburyport on the Sixty-First Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence," reprinted in part in *The New Federalist*, Vol. 13, No. 32.

2. See Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).

A Continental Republic

From his entry into politics at a very young age, John Quincy Adams advocated the expansion of the United States to dominate the North American continent. He supported the Louisiana Purchase, for example, as a move in this direction—as did Alexander Hamilton. One major underpinning of his reasoning was that allowing any of the European powers to maintain a foothold in North America—Spain, France, Russia, or Great Britain—would tend to lead to constant wars, and toward balkanization of the continent.

In a letter to his mother in 1811, right before the War of 1812, Adams wrote the following: “If that Party [Federalist]

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are not effectually put down in Massachusetts, as completely as they already are in New York, and Pennsylvania, and all the southern and western states, the Union is gone. Instead of a nation coextensive with the North American continent, destined by God and nature to be the most populous and most powerful people ever combined under one social compact, we shall have an endless multitude of little insignificant clans and tribes at eternal war with one another for a rock, or a fish pond, the sport and fable of European masters and oppressors.”³

During the War of 1812, and thereafter, there was no lack of evidence that the European imperial powers might want to take advantage of the young, and militarily weak, United States. Spain, at that time, controlled Florida and Cuba. Mexico, which had declared independence in 1813, reached well up into what is now the southwestern United States. Both Russia and Great Britain had claims on the West Coast, and, of course, Great Britain had control over Canada. There was also considerable rivalry between these powers, and various efforts were made by Russia and Great Britain, in particular, to get alliances with the United States for various purposes—the kind of alliances which George Washington would correctly have called “entangling.”

In this context, Adams considered it critical to negotiate expansion of the boundaries of the United States all the way to the Pacific Ocean, thus establishing a foothold for the U.S. to become a continental republic. The vehicle which he used was his negotiations with Spain over the years 1818 and 1819.

3. Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundation of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950).

While the detonator for the negotiations was the threat to American lives in Spanish-occupied Florida, the final treaty, called the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, not only resulted in the cession of Florida to the United States, but it established the claim of the United States to the continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the 42nd to 49th parallel. Why did the Spanish do this? According to Bemis, it was because that monarchy, being hard-pressed by the British Empire, wanted a free hand to turn its attention to South America, where its former colonies were making rapid moves toward independence.

Community of Principle

Through the course of the negotiations with the Spanish, the Russians, and the British in the period, Secretary of State Adams was walking a tightrope. On the one hand, he and President Monroe were committed to firm support for emerging republics, in the name of the principles of self-determination, independence, and human liberty. By March 1822, in fact, the United States had recognized the new republics of Chile, the United Provinces of the Rio de la Plata (today Argentina), Peru, Colombia, and Mexico. On the other hand, Adams held firm to Washington’s principle of refusing to enter military, or positive, alliances with any of the imperial powers, or even with their former colonies.

What came first with Adams, was the maintenance of the American System of republican liberty, as it was defined by the principles laid out in the Declaration of Independence. Any nation which did not abide by such principles, could not be part of a “community of principle” with the United States. Adams even told a Spanish diplomat in 1820 that he considered the United States to be the only example of the American System. “There is no community of interests or of principles between North and South America,” he said.

Meanwhile, Britain, of all places, was putting pressure on the United States to unite with it, allegedly in support of liberation movements against Spain, France, and Russia. In response, Adams gave a Fourth of July speech in 1821, in which he outlined two basic principles of America’s relations with all other nations and peoples: first, the anticolonial principle, and second, the anti-entanglement principle. It was in this speech that Adams asserted that, from the moral and physical nature of man, “colonial establishments cannot fulfill the great objects of governments in the just purposes of civil society.”

He described the American revolution’s universal significance thus: “In a conflict [of] seven years, the history of the war by which you maintained that Declaration, became the history of the civilized world. . . . It was the first solemn declaration by a nation of the only *legitimate* foundation of civil government. It was the cornerstone of a new fabric, destined to cover the surface of the globe. It demolished at a stroke, the lawfulness of all governments founded upon conquest. It swept away all the rubbish of accumulated centuries of servitude. From the day of this Declaration, the people of North

America were no longer the fragment of a distant empire, imploring justice and mercy from an inexorable master in another hemisphere. They were a *nation*, asserting as of right, and maintaining by war, its own existence. A nation was born in a day. . . . It stands, and must for ever stand, alone, a beacon on the summit of the mountain, to which all the inhabitants of the earth may turn their eyes for a genial and saving light . . . a light of salvation and redemption to the oppressed.”⁴

Adams said that colonial establishments “are incompatible with the essential character of our institutions,” and concluded, “that great colonial establishments are engines of wrong, and that in the progress of social improvement it will be the duty of the human family to abolish them, as they are now endeavoring to abolish the slave trade.” The message was not missed by the Russian imperial minister, who reported it to have been “a virulent diatribe against England.”

The British under Prime Minister George Canning, however, did not give up. Although Britain had not recognized the new republics of South America, and the United States had, Canning approached the U.S. Ambassador to England with a proposal for an alliance on the question of South America. While others in the cabinet, and former Presidents Jefferson and Madison, were inclined to accept, especially because the United States did not have the military capability to defend its position against recolonization, Adams was adamant, that the United States should not accept, and act as a “cockboat in the wake of a British man-of-war.”

But there were principled reasons as well. Despite apparent tactical agreement on the issue of South America, “Britain and America . . . would not be bound by any permanent community of principle,” Adams said. In other words, the nation of the Declaration of Independence, and the British Empire, did not share objectives, and thus could not make such an alliance.

But Adams did outline a positive policy toward South America, which Bemis summarizes as 1) upholding the republican principle against monarchy; 2) support of the American System of separation from the monarchical system of Europe; 3) a positive view toward the idea of an inter-American Congress; and 4) treaties of commerce and amity should be forged on the basis of the “most-favored-nation” principle.

In a memorandum to Richard C. Anderson, U.S. Minister to Colombia, in 1823, Adams put it eloquently: “The emancipation of the South American continent opens to the whole race of man prospects of futurity, in which this union will be called in the discharge of its duties to itself and to unnumbered ages of posterity to take a conspicuous and leading part. It invokes all that is precious in hope and all that is desirable in existence to the countless millions of our fellow creatures, which in the progressive revolutions of time this hemisphere is destined to rear and to maintain. That the fabric of our social

connections with our southern neighbors may rise in the lapse of years with a grandeur and harmony of proportions corresponding with the magnificence of the means, placed by providence in our power and in that of our descendants, its foundations must be laid in principles of politics and of morals new and distasteful to the thrones and dominations of the elder world, but coextensive with the surface of the globe and lasting as the changes of time.”

The Monroe Doctrine

Thus, on Dec. 2, 1823, President Monroe, feeling impelled to take action in the face of possible European moves to reconquer the infant South American republics, issued his Monroe Doctrine. It was composed of three principal elements, all of which had been shaped by John Quincy Adams:

1. Non-colonization: “The American Continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintained, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European power.”

2. Abstention: The United States will not involve itself in European affairs unrelated to its interests: “It is only when our rights are invaded, or seriously menaced, that we resent injuries, or make preparations for our defense.”

3. Hands off: “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.”

As Bemis points out, the Monroe Doctrine was the other side of the Manifest Destiny policy of extending the republican principle throughout the continent. If imperialism was not to be allowed, that only left peaceful expansion, or cooperation, by or between sovereign republics. And Adams was clear that he did not see expansion by conquest, even of Canada.

The Monroe Doctrine was honored by those Presidents who clung to the American System. Presidents Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt were the most notable ones to rise to this standard—not to mention John Quincy Adams’s Presidency (1824-28). During the rest of the 19th Century, the “American System” Presidents also pursued the spread of economic development projects internationally, as an indispensable spur to building republican nations.

But the breaches of these principles became increasingly numerous—from the Mexican-American War, to the Spanish-American War, to the (Teddy) Roosevelt corollary to the Doctrine (calling for intervention to collect debt), to the invasions of Mexico under Woodrow Wilson’s Administration. In 1982, the United States support for Great Britain’s war against Argentina in the Malvinas, was a complete violation of the Monroe Doctrine.

That said, the John Quincy Adams approach to foreign policy remains the standard that must be readopted today.

4. Cited by Anton Chaitkin in a speech delivered to the Schiller Institute Labor Day Conference, 1998.