

Lesson Fifty

The Monroe Doctrine

LESSON IDEA

To explain why the Monroe Doctrine was needed, its effects, and how the policy gave official expression to a principle that dated back to the founding of our Republic.

PREPARATION

Have the map used for Lesson 48 available. Read the "During The Week" section and prepare for the suggested discussions.

JOHAN QUINCY ADAMS, Secretary of State under President James Monroe, better understood 19th century Englishmen than any other U.S. statesman at the time. As a result, he could counter their haughty arrogance with unequalled skill. It was fortunate, since in 1821 the British minister to the United States, Stratford Canning, became restive about the establishment of a permanent American settlement in Oregon at the point where the Columbia River empties into the Pacific. [Use the map from Lesson 48 to pinpoint the "Oregon Country."]

Ownership of the Oregon Country, which lay west of the Rocky Mountains and outside the boundaries of the Louisiana Territory, was an unsettled question at the time. The English had opened maritime trade along its coast in 1785, but Captain Robert Gray of Boston had established an American claim to it in 1792 by discovering the mouth of the Columbia River. Lewis and Clark solidified that claim in 1805 by exploring its wilderness lands. In 1818, a temporary compromise was reached when England and the United States agreed that the territory should remain under joint occupation for ten years. The British meant to use the time to push the Americans out and absorb Oregon into their Canadian empire. But as American pioneer families pushed westward, The British began to feel uneasy that a handful of English traders might not be able to hold the country against a multitude of American settlers gradually taking possession of the land. Canning was determined to keep the territory under British control. When news reached him that American frontiersmen were moving into

Oregon with an eye to settling near the mouth of the Columbia River, he demanded an explanation of U.S. motives and plans.

Adams put a stop to this audacious inquisition with a simple, pointed question: "Have you any claim to the mouth of the Columbia River?" His meaning was clear. An American sea captain, not an Englishman, had discovered the river's mouth. And in 1805 the American explorers Lewis and Clark had established winter quarters in the area after exploring the Oregon wilderness.

But Canning chose to ignore the obvious. "Why," he replied disdainfully, "do you not know that we have a claim?"

Adams retorted, "I do not know what you claim nor what you do not claim. You claim India; you claim Africa; you claim . . ."

"Perhaps," said Canning sarcastically, "a piece of the moon."

"No," responded Adams, "I have not heard you claim exclusively any part of the moon; but there is not a spot on this habitable globe that I could affirm you do not claim!"

Despite England's claims and imperial ambitions, America ultimately secured the land — not because we saw it first, but because our frontiersmen settled it first, plowing the ground, planting the crops, and living on the farms. The Oregon Country later was later divided into three states. Can you name them? [Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. The treaty that made the Oregon wilderness an American possession, and established a new boundary between the U.S. and Britain, was signed in 1846.]

ADAMS DISPLAYED the same firm attitude toward Russia when that imperial nation began extending her tentacles of power down the Pacific coast from Alaska. Russians demanded that the fisheries of Northern Canada be reserved for its own use, and that ships from other nations be forbidden to approach within 100 miles. Its trading posts already extended 500 miles south of the Columbia River,

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

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

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

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

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

FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

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

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

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

Many Americans, caught up in the intoxicating

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

