

Lesson Forty-Nine

John Quincy Adams

LESSON IDEA

To show how the statesmanship of John Quincy Adams guided our foreign policy in the early 1800's and helped us settle a serious crisis in Florida.

PREPARATION

Have the map from last week's lesson available. Be prepared to explain the concept of "privileged sanctuaries" that was implemented during Korean and Vietnam wars as part of our foreign policy establishment's "no-win" strategy in both conflicts. Also cite example of present-day U.S. foreign policy that appease world opinion rather than promote legitimate our (and constitutional) national interests.

IN 1817, Spain was the most painful thorn in the side of the United States. Ambitions of the swaggering bullies of Europe, France and England, had been checked by the Louisiana Purchase and the War of 1812. But Spain's influence remained in Florida, Texas, New Mexico, California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and the southern edges of Mississippi and Alabama. [The map from last week's lesson shows the large western area held by Spain.]

The border between Florida's Spanish blue bloods and America's southern pioneer farmers was the most volatile. Seminole Indians roamed between the two national powers, a ragtag aggregation largely comprised of misfits and rejects from other tribes. An Indian who could claim no other tribe became a Seminole. The tribe had attracted so many castoffs, including fugitives from the defeated Creek nation and disgruntled English traders, that it had become little more than a guerrilla gang.

In Florida, Spain was too weak to adequately discipline even its own adventurers, so let the Seminoles do as they pleased, which including shooting, scalping, and massacring Americans. The risk of retaliation by their pioneer enemies was slight, since the Seminoles had only to retreat into Spanish territory, where they could not be pursued without creating an "international incident."

There is a name for this type of strategic

retreat. So you know what it is? Do you know what it is? [The term "privileged sanctuaries" was used during the Korean War to describe the communist tactic of retreating behind the boundary that General Douglas MacArthur was prohibited crossing. The same technique was used to give an advantage to the communist side of the Vietnam war. From its privileged sanctuary, a warring group can safely regroup for a new offensive because its opponents are prohibited from attacking its bases, supply lines, or scattered forces.]

General Andrew Jackson, Southern District Commander of the American Army in 1817, clearly understood the problems posed by privileged sanctuaries. When he was ordered to end massacres by Indians on the Georgia border, he offered his own solution. Since his superiors could not command him to enter Spanish territory in pursuit of the enemy (for that would have been an act of war), he would do the job without official orders. All he asked was an unofficial wink of approval from President Monroe.

Whether the wink was given remains a matter of debate to this day. But it is not debatable that the hero of New Orleans moved rapidly to the Florida border with an impression that his government wished him to clean up the mess in the most expeditious and thorough manner possible.

Jackson's troops quickly broke the power of the Seminoles in northern Florida. Then they burst into Spanish territory to destroy the privileged sanctuaries. General Jackson seized the Spanish fort of St. Mark's, then moved on to the town of Pensacola. When the Spanish governor fled to Fort Barrancas at the mouth of the harbor, Jackson bombarded the fort and forced it to surrender. The Americans captured an Englishman named Ambrister (who had commanded parties of hostile Indians) and a Scotsman named Arbuthnot (who had warned the Seminoles of approaching American troops). Both men were given a speedy trial and convicted. Ambrister was shot; Arbuthnot hanged.

JACKSON'S swift and effective campaign broke the enemy's will to resist. When St. Mark's was seized without resistance, and Fort Barrancas reduced by artillery fire, every Seminole in Florida realized that reliance on Spain for protection was utter folly, since Spanish leaders could not save even their own people, much less the Seminole warriors, from American vengeance. Both Spanish prestige and British influence in the area suffered a fatal blow. Jackson's entire campaign lasted only 59 days, but uproar it generated in the United States, Spain, and England lasted for months. In the words of historian John T. Morse, Jr.:

Seldom has a government been brought by the undue zeal of its servants into a quandary more perplexing than that into which the reckless military hero brought the Administration of President Monroe ... How to treat this too successful chieftain was no simple problem. He had done what he ought not to have done, yet everybody in the country was heartily glad that he had done it The President was concerned lest his Administration should be brought into indefensible embarrassment; [Secretary of War] Calhoun was personally displeased because the instructions issued from his department had been exceeded. . .

The Secretary of the Treasury and the Speaker of the House expressed outrage at Jackson's action, though their main objection may have been that the campaign made Jackson a national hero and potential presidential candidate. Among members of the president's cabinet, only the Secretary of State John Quincy Adams stood by the general who had acted so vigorously and decisively. Jackson's crossing of the Spanish frontier was justified, Adams reasoned, as an act of defensive warfare. "All the rest," he argued, "even to the order for taking the Fort of Barrancas by storm, was incidental, deriving its character from the object, which was not hostility to Spain, but the termination of the Indian war." Through long and anxious sessions Adams stood fast against Jackson's political enemies in Congress, as well as the indignant Spanish who demanded apologies and threatened war.

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson became bitter enemies in later years. Their political views were as distinctly different as were their temperaments. Both became presidents of the United States, and both had a considerable influence on subsequently U.S. politics. For more information about these important historical figures, the biographies *John Quincy Adams* by John T. Morse, Jr., and *Andrew Jackson* by Gerald W. Johnson, are highly recommended. Both books are out-of-print, but should be available at most public libraries.

Some Congressmen accused Jackson of being a Caesar, Alexander, Napoleon, or Cromwell, and moved to have his actions censured. But Adams had no intention of abandoning Jackson to political wolves in either the U.S. or Spain. It was the opinion of this sturdy New Englander that when the army won an important advantage, the diplomats were to consolidate that advantage, not quarrel with the generals. It was also his firm opinion that neither the Spanish nor the English belonged on the American continent. It was, he contended, a "physical, moral, and political absurdity" for either nation to expect to keep its lands on our side of the ocean, and he was anxious that the rest of the world become "familiarized with the idea of considering our proper dominion to be the continent of North America." Let other nations label us ambitious, aggressive, militant, or whatever. Adams cared not a whit.

Jackson's "reckless" behavior disrupted the progress Adams had made with Spain regarding the Florida question, but that did not bother the Secretary of State. He was from the same sturdy Adams stock that helped bring independence to the new nation, and his concern, as had been his father's, was not political popularity or personal ambition, but the best interests of the American Republic.

How do Adams' convictions compare with those of contemporary Secretaries of State? How did his support of Jackson compare with the treatment of General Douglas MacArthur by President Truman and our State Department during the Korean War?

[Refer to Lesson 42 for details.]

We are indeed fortunate today that at a critical moment during the Spanish-Florida crisis our nation was guided by a Secretary of State whose

