The Monroe Doctrine

President James Monroe worried about European powers influencing the Western Hemisphere. Russia was interested in parts of the Pacific Northwest. In Latin America, Spain sought to regain control over its former colonies. Monroe feared that Prussia, Austria, France, or Russia might try to help Spain. He felt the presence of the powerful European countries in the Americas threatened the security of the United States. Britain, which hoped to trade with Spain’s former colonies, also wanted to prevent them from falling into the hands of a rival European power. Consequently, Great Britain approached the United States with the idea of issuing a joint declaration calling for non-interference in the Western Hemisphere. U.S. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams knew that the U.S. could rely the British navy to maintain Latin American independence regardless of whether or not the United States signed on to this declaration. Not wishing to play the role of Britain’s junior partner, he recommended that President Monroe beat Britain to the punch by issuing his own declaration warning all Europeans (including Britain) to stay out of the Western Hemisphere. On December 2, 1823, Monroe issued a warning to European nations that became known as the Monroe Doctrine.

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.

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 connected. [...] 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 in any other light than as a manifestation of an unfriendly disposition to the United States.

James Monroe, Speech to Congress (1823)

Questions

1. What warning does Monroe give to European nations?

2. Why would the United States prefer independent Latin American nations to European colonies?

3. Is this statement a variation from George Washington’s previous policy of neutrality toward Europe? Explain.

4. How do you suppose European nations responded to the Monroe Doctrine?

5. Did the United States have the military power to back up this statement in 1823? Explain.