



The Monroe Doctrine and the War

Author(s): Carl Becker

Source: *Minnesota History Bulletin*, May, 1917, Vol. 2, No. 2 (May, 1917), pp. 61-68

Published by: Minnesota Historical Society Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20160218>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Minnesota Historical Society Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Minnesota History Bulletin*

JSTOR

THE MONROE DOCTRINE AND THE WAR

In one sense at least it may be said that we are entering the Great War as a united people. Nearly every one says, "There was nothing else we could do." Nevertheless, in the minds of many, probably in the minds of a majority, this very common expression implies that it is too bad we could not have done "something else"; too bad, that is, not only because it is always unfortunate to have to wage war, but because for the United States to wage war in Europe means a sharp reversal of our traditional policy, a complete renunciation of that long-established principle of action commonly known as the Monroe Doctrine. While we accept this renunciation willingly enough as a necessity, and some accept it gladly, most of us doubtless accept it with regret, as the lesser of two evils; and probably most of us have been somewhat at a loss to know what could be the meaning of President Wilson's statement that in entering the war we are not really renouncing but only extending the Monroe Doctrine. The average hard-headed citizen has doubtless said to himself, "That is only one of Mr. Wilson's fine phrases, an expression of his idealism."

If the Monroe Doctrine means no more than it seems on the surface to mean, President Wilson's statement is indeed only a phrase, and not a very fine one at that. Superficially interpreted, the Monroe Doctrine seems to mean that since we are isolated and provincial in a geographical sense, we will be so politically. Possessed of a rich and easily defended country, we will ask no favors of Europe and will concede her none. "What have we to do with abroad?" Nothing. We mind our business, and respectfully ask Europe to mind hers. We are in the fortunate position of Little Jack Horner: having got, by our own efforts and the favor of Providence, an excellent Christmas pie, we have only to sit in our corner and eat it.

Now and then, for the edification of less happy peoples, we may very well pull out a plum and say: "Do you see? This is our plum. You eat your plum and we will eat our plum; but you must agree, since we have got such a fine one, that we are a very superior people." Now Mr. Wilson, whether his purpose be to get some of Europe's plum or only to give her some of ours, is clearly asking us to give up this attitude. He requires us to come out of our corner.

It is possible, however, that our motives in adopting the Monroe Doctrine may have been inspired by something more estimable than those of Little Jack Horner, something more justifiable than the mere narrow provincialism and petty selfishness of a people intent only upon being undisturbed in the pursuit of material well-being; in which case Mr. Wilson may be right after all in saying that in entering the European war we are not renouncing but only extending the Monroe Doctrine. But if that is so, then this doctrine must mean something more than it seems on the surface to mean. A consideration of the circumstances which gave rise to the Monroe Doctrine will in fact show, I think, that it was the expression of something more peculiarly American, of something far more important for America and for the world than any mere geographical or political isolation.

The policy embodied in the Monroe Doctrine was first clearly expressed by Washington. At that time the United States had but recently and with great difficulty won its independence from Great Britain. The war for independence was justified on the principle that all men have equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that accordingly all just governments derive their sanction from the consent of the governed. When independence was won, the government of the United States was founded upon that principle; and from that day to this the guiding ideal of our political and social life has been the right of the people to govern themselves and the obligation of the people to assure, so far as possible, equal opportunity to all citizens. In its origin and in its history the United

States had stood for this or it has stood for nothing. Our whole social enterprise has been, in the estimation of Europe rather more than of America, an experiment in democracy on a large scale, the most momentous attempt in the history of the world to determine whether government of the people, by the people, and for the people might endure permanently.

In the days of Washington this venture of the United States was a fairly novel one, with no brilliant prospects of ultimate success. The newly established government was feeble, the country was loaded with debt, and public opinion was divided over the double danger of political anarchy and executive tyranny. Able men in America and in Europe believed that the United States must sooner or later surrender either its independence or its free government; that its feeble government must either give place to a strong monarchy or in self-defense be drawn into the system of European alliances and so lose the better part of independence. The opposition in the country between the Federalists and the Republican followers of Jefferson was greatly intensified and embittered by the French Revolution; while the European wars made it difficult and at last impossible for the United States to maintain its neutrality and at the same time defend its rights. After submitting to repeated humiliations, after resorting to every measure short of war, the United States at last fought with England the war which is sometimes called the second war of independence.

The policy of the United States during this period found classic expression in the famous Farewell Address of President Washington. "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.—Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns.—Hence therefore it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties in the

ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships, or enmities. . . . If we remain one People, under an efficient government, the period is not far off, when . . . belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as our interests guided by our justice shall counsel.—Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation?— . . . Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humour, or caprice?”

To understand why Washington so strongly urged this policy one must read the entire Farewell Address. It will then be clear that the danger which engaged him most was the danger of internal division. The principal part of the address is concerned with pointing out those evils which threatened to dissolve the union and to place the stamp of failure on the newly established federal government. To prevent this greatest of calamities he urged his countrymen to renounce those class enmities and sectional and party rivalries that were likely to weaken the union of the states; and it was precisely because he felt that entangling alliances abroad would endanger the union and undermine free government that he wished to avoid such alliances. “How many opportunities do they [exaggerated attachments or hostilities to foreign nations] afford to tamper with domestic factions, to practise the arts of seduction, to mislead public opinion, to influence or awe the public councils! . . . Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence, I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens, the jealousy of a free people ought to be *constantly* awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of Republican Government.—But that jealousy to be useful must be impartial; else it becomes the instrument of the very influence to be avoided, instead of a defence against it.”

The situation which gave rise to President Monroe’s famous message in 1823 was in some respects different from that which

confronted Washington and Jefferson. The government of the United States had become well established, the people were conscious of their power and wedded to their institutions. At the same time republican governments were being rapidly established in South America, where the revolted Spanish colonies had already practically won independence. In Europe, on the other hand, the public policy of the Great Powers was guided by reactionary ideals. After 1815 the chief aim of the principal states was to prevent a repetition of the stupendous conflicts which had characterized the Napoleonic era. To preserve the peace of Europe, in the opinion of Metternich, who was the guiding spirit, at least after 1818, of the Concert of Europe, it was necessary to maintain the existing political system. The chief danger to the existing political system was manifestly those republican theories spread abroad by the American and the French revolutions. It was therefore the duty of the Great Powers to act in concert in the suppression of all revolutions intended to propagate or establish republican institutions. And, in fact, at the Congress of Verona the four powers of Austria, Prussia, Russia, and France resolved that since "the system of representative government is equally as incompatible with monarchical principles as the maxim of the sovereignty of the people is with the divine right," they would bind themselves "mutually, in the most solemn manner, to use all their efforts to put an end to the system of representative governments, in whatever country it may exist in Europe, and to prevent its being introduced in those countries where it is not yet known." On these grounds revolutions in Italy were suppressed by Austria, France was given a free hand in restoring the Bourbons to the Spanish throne, and it was a mooted question whether the concerted powers had not bound themselves to suppress the South American republics and return them as colonies to Spain.

Under these circumstances the United States again declared its intention not to become implicated in the European system of alliances. In 1820, in an interview with Stratford Canning,

the English minister to the United States, Secretary Adams declared that "the European alliance . . . had . . . regulated the affairs of all Europe without ever calling the United States to their consultations. It was best for both parties that they should continue to do so; for if the United States should become a member of the body they would . . . bring to it some principles not congenial to those of the other members, and those principles would lead to discussions tending to discord rather than to harmony." But, in view of the threatened intervention of the European powers in South America, an intervention based avowedly upon hostility to republican institutions, President Monroe declared in his message of 1823 (the ideas were those of Adams more than of the president) that the "peace and happiness" of the United States would be endangered if the "allied powers should extend their political system" to any portion of the American continent. "The political system of the allied powers," he said, "is essentially different . . . from that of America. This difference proceeds from that which exists in their respective governments. And to the defence 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 . . . this whole nation is devoted."

It is to be observed that neither Washington nor Monroe supposed that Europe and America should have nothing to do with each other; the main point was that the United States would not enter into the European system of alliances, and would oppose the extension of the European political system to this continent. The most notable attempt to extend the political system of Europe to America occurred during the Civil War, when Emperor Napoleon III, by means of the French army, established an Austrian prince in Mexico on the ruins of her former republican institutions. Against this enterprise the United States protested vigorously; and the grounds of this protest were clearly stated by Secretary Seward in 1865. "The real cause of our national discontent is, that the French

army which is now in Mexico is invading a domestic republican government there which was established by her people . . . for the avowed purpose of suppressing it and establishing upon its ruins a foreign monarchical government, whose presence there, so long as it should endure, could not but be regarded by the people of the United States as injurious and menacing to their own chosen and endeared republican institutions. . . . The people of every State on the American continent have a right to secure for themselves a republican government if they choose, and . . . interference by foreign states to prevent the enjoyment of such institutions deliberately established is wrongful, and in its effects antagonistical to the free and popular form of government existing in the United States.”

It can not of course be maintained that the United States has invariably acted with chastened purposes and worthy aims, or that it has never invoked the Monroe Doctrine except for the disinterested and ideal purpose of defending democratic institutions. Nor can it be denied that the policy embodied in the Monroe Doctrine has been an expression of our material interests. The historical process does not occur in a vacuum; the motives of individuals or of peoples are not pigeonholed. The Monroe Doctrine is based upon material interests precisely as much or as little as democracy itself. It may be safely said, however, that in the crucial instances of the formulation of the Monroe Doctrine one essential and determining influence has been the incompatibility of European and American political institutions and ideals; and fundamentally our policy has been to protest against the extension of the European political system to America because, on account of that incompatibility, such an extension would endanger our institutions as well as our interests. In this sense the Monroe Doctrine has been the expression of that most deep-seated of American instincts, the attachment to free government and democratic social institutions. It is as if we had said to Europe: “We are bound that this great experiment in democracy shall have a fair

chance. It may fail in the end. If so, let it at least be clearly demonstrated that the failure is due to inherent weaknesses and not to external interference. We propose, if it be a possible thing, to make this part of the world at least safe for democracy."

If this is the essential meaning of the Monroe Doctrine, is there anything in it which should restrain us from joining the Allies against Germany? If this is its essential meaning, are we not on the contrary committed by it to join the Allies against Germany? With the progress of the Great War it has become as clear as day that the vital issue in this stupendous struggle is whether democratic and peaceful, or autocratic and military, ideals are to shape the future destinies of Europe. Few Americans deny that a decisive victory for Germany would be an irremediable defeat for democracy. Can it be supposed, then, that such a defeat for democracy in Europe would not be a menace to democracy in America? Clearly not. A triumphant Germany would be more ominous than the Holy Alliance ever was; England defeated would be a more fatal reverse for the United States in 1917 than the restoration of the South American republics to Spain would have been in 1823. For a hundred years we have asked, and not in vain, that Europe should leave America free to try the great experiment in free government. Now that the better part of Europe is engaged in a desperate and uncertain struggle for the preservation of the very ideals of which we have been hitherto the professed champion, it is the part of wisdom as well as highly fitting that we should have our share in making the world safe for democracy. I can not think that in pledging our lives and our fortunes to bring about that fortunate event the people of the United States, whose country was "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," can be in serious danger of departing from their profoundest traditions.

CARL BECKER

THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
MINNEAPOLIS