What was the Monroe Doctrine?

America suffered one notable casualty in the War of 1812. The Federalist Party, which had opposed the war, was mortally wounded. Peace had delivered a large political bonus for Madison and his party. In 1816, the Federalists barely mounted opposition to Madison's chosen successor, James Monroe, next in the "Virginian dynasty" that started with Washington, was delayed by Adams, and continued through Jefferson and Madison.

Elected at age fifty-eight, Monroe had seen much in his life. A veteran of the War of Independence, he had fought at Trenton, was twice governor of Virginia and then a senator from that state. As a diplomat he helped engineer the Louisiana Purchase. Like Jefferson and Madison before him, he had served as secretary of state, giving that post and not the vice presidency the luster of heir apparent's office.

With the great foreign disputes settled and the nation comfortably accepting one-party rule, Monroe's years were later dubbed the Era of Good Feelings. It was a period of rapid economic expansion, especially in the Northeast, as manufacturing began to replace shipbuilding as the leading industry. These calm years saw the beginnings of the machine age, as men like Eli Whitney, Seth Thomas of mechanical clock fame, and Francis Cabot Lowell were bringing America into the first stages of the Industrial Revolution. A series of postwar treaties with the British solidified the nation's boundaries and eliminated the threat of another war with England.

But the most notable historical milestone in this administration came in an address given to Congress in 1823. The speech was as much the work of Monroe's secretary of state, John Quincy Adams, son of the second president, but some decades later it came to be called the Monroe Doctrine.

In this speech, Monroe essentially declared that the United States would not tolerate intervention in the Americas by European nations. Monroe also promised that the United States wouldn't interfere with already established colonies or with governments in Europe. In one sense, this declaration was an act of isolationism, with America withdrawing from the political tempests of Europe. But it was also a recognition of a changing world order. Part of this new reality was the crumbling of the old Spanish Empire in the New World, and rebellions swept South America, creating republics under such leaders as Simon Bolívar, José de San Martín, and—the most unlikely name in South American history—Bernardo O'Higgins, the son of an Irish army officer and leader of the new republic of Chile. By 1822, America recognized the independent republics of Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and La Plata (comprising present-day Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama).

On the positive side, the doctrine marked what might be called the last step in America's march to independence, which had begun in the Revolution and moved through post-independence foreign treaties, the Louisiana Purchase, the War of 1812, and the postwar agreements. But from another historical perspective, the Doctrine became the basis for a good deal of high-handed interference in South American affairs as the United States embarked on a path of meddling in Central and South America. As demonstrated by the "revolution" that created Panama with Teddy Roosevelt's help (see p. 291) and, more recently, the long war against Fidel Castro and the illegal support of the contra rebels in Nicaragua during the 1980s, that hemispheric interference has continued for centuries.

What was the Missouri Compromise?

As proof of the "good feelings," Monroe was almost unanimously reelected in 1820, winning 231 of the 232 electoral votes cast that year. Popular legend has it that one elector withheld his vote to preserve Washington's record as the only unanimously elected president. But the facts show that the one elector who voted for Secretary of State John Quincy Adams did not know how everyone else would vote, and simply cast his ballot for Adams because he admired him.

While it may have been the Era of Good Feelings, not everyone felt so good. Certainly the Indians who were being decimated and pushed into shrinking territories by the rapacious westward push didn't feel so good. Nor did the slaves of the South, who now had to harvest a new crop in cotton, which had replaced tobacco as king. And it was the question of slavery that led to the other noteworthy milestone in the Monroe years—one about which Monroe had little to say—the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

From the day when Jefferson drafted the Declaration, through the debates at the Philadelphia convention, slavery was clearly an issue that America would be forced to confront. The earlier compromises of the Declaration and Constitution were beginning to show their age. Even though the slave trade had been outlawed in 1808 under a provision of the constitutional compromise, an illicit trade in slaves continued. The chief argument of the day was not about importing new slaves, however, but about the admission of new states to the Union, and whether they would be free or slave states.

It is important to realize that while strong abolitionist movements were beginning to gather force in America, the slavery debate was essentially about politics and economics rather than morality. The "three-fifths" compromise written into the Constitution, allowing slaves to be counted as part of the total population for the purpose of allocating congressional representation, gave slave states a political advantage over free states. Every new state meant two more Senate votes and a proportional number of House votes. Slave states wanted those votes to maintain their political power. Of course, there was an economic dimension to this issue. Wage-paying northerners were forced to compete against slave labor in the South. For southerners, wealth was land. With Eli Whitney's cotton gin (the word "gin" is short for "engine") allowing huge increases of efficiency in production, and the new factories of Lowell in New England to make cloth, the market for cotton was booming. Slaveholding southerners needed more land to grow more cotton to sell to the textile mills of the Northeast and England, and slaves were needed to work that land. If gaining new land to plant meant creating new states, slaveholders wanted them to be slave states.

By adding massive real estate to the equation under the Louisiana Purchase, the United States brought the free state/slave state issue to a head, particularly in the case of Missouri, which petitioned for statehood in 1817. With Henry Clay taking the lead, Congress agreed on another compromise. Under Clay's bill, Missouri would be admitted as a slave state, but slavery would not be allowed anywhere else north of Missouri's southern border. But every politician in America, including an aging Thomas Jefferson, could see the strict sectional lines that were being drawn, and few believed that this Missouri Compromise would solve the problem forever. Of course, the issue would soon explode.