

The Making of a Nation – Program No. 40

James Monroe, Part 1: Monroe Elected President in 1816

From VOA Learning English, welcome to The Making of a Nation, our weekly program of American history for people learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

President James Madison retired after eight years in office. His Republican party chose another Virginian, James Monroe, as its next presidential candidate.

The opposition Federalist Party had almost disappeared by the time of the election in 1816. James Monroe easily won the election. But not everyone was happy with the result. After all, Monroe was the fourth president from the state of Virginia. The situation caused hard feelings among political leaders in other areas, especially the states of New England.

Monroe sought to improve this situation. He wanted to give the top four jobs in his cabinet to men from each of the nation's four major areas: the Northeast, the South, the West and the Middle Atlantic coast.

But he could find no Westerner who would take the job as head of the War Department. So he had cabinet ministers from only three of the four areas. The West was not represented.

Despite the political concerns, most Americans liked Monroe and welcomed his presidency.

Historian Harlow Giles Unger has written more than 20 books, including one about James Monroe. Mr. Unger says Monroe was one of America's most beloved presidents. He had been secretary of state *and* secretary of war at the same time under President Madison. He had also been a diplomat under President Thomas Jefferson and helped carry out the Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the size of the country. And, Monroe had fought in the Revolutionary War and in the War of 1812.

"So Monroe came out of the War of 1812 as a hero. And he and his wife, his beautiful wife Elizabeth, moved into what was the blackened hulk of a presidential mansion. And workers slathered on, really slathered on these thick, thick coats of white paint, and really, so thick that it gleamed white."

Harlow Unger says the new president sought to improve the country's safety. Monroe wanted to prevent any more invasions and to extend the country's natural defenses.

One of the first problems he faced was in east Florida, in land which is now part of the state of Florida. The area borders the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico.

At that time, east Florida belonged to Spain. But Spain controlled only a few towns in the area. The rest was controlled by criminals, escaped slaves and former British soldiers.

The area was also home to native American Indians of the Seminole and Creek tribes. Sometimes, people from east Florida would enter the state of

Georgia and attack American citizens. One serious fight involved Seminole Indians and people just across the Georgia border.

Monroe ordered General Andrew Jackson to march against the Indians. Jackson was a hero of the War of 1812 against Britain. He sent a message to President Monroe. It said:

"Let me know in any way that the United States wants possession of the Florida territory. And in 60 days, it will be done."

Jackson received no answer to his letter. He believed the silence meant that he was free to seize Florida. He quickly gathered a force of soldiers and marched toward Florida.

General Jackson failed to capture any Indians. But he seized two Spanish towns: Saint Marks and Pensacola.

He also arrested two British subjects. The two men were tried by a military court. They were found guilty of spying and giving guns to the Indians. Both were executed.

President Monroe called a cabinet meeting as soon as he learned of Jackson's actions. All the ministers, except Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, believed that Jackson had gone too far. But they decided not to denounce him in public.

Secretary Adams prepared messages to Britain and Spain about the

incidents. His message to Britain carefully stated the activities of the two British subjects in Florida and explained why they were executed. Britain agreed not to take any action.

Adams's message to Spain explained the situation this way: Spain had failed to keep the peace along the border as it had promised to do in a treaty. The United States had sent soldiers into Florida only to defend its citizens on the American side.

The United States recognized that Florida belonged to Spain. But if Americans were forced to enter Florida again — in self-defense — the United States might not return the territory to Spain. Spain had a choice. It could send enough soldiers to keep order in Florida. Or it could give Florida to the United States.

Spain really had no choice. At that time, Spain's colonies in South America were rebelling. All had declared their independence. Jose de San Martin led the struggle in Argentina. Bernardo O'Higgins was in Chile. And Simon Bolivar created the Republic of Great Colombia in the north.

Spain's forces could not be sent to Florida. They were needed in South America. So the king of Spain agreed to give Florida to the United States. In exchange, the United States agreed to pay five million dollars to American citizens who had damage claims against Spain.

Historian Harlow Unger says the negotiations with Spain led to more than just Florida. He says President Monroe and Spanish officials also agreed on

the boundaries of the Louisiana Purchase. They set the boundaries on the very top of the Rocky Mountains, in the central-west of the United States. The mountains created a natural border.

Mr. Unger says they extended American territory into the northwest edge of the continent, to what are now the states of Washington and Oregon. In other words, he says, Monroe moved the American frontier to the Pacific Ocean.

“He really stretched the nation into an empire that reached from sea to shining sea.”

With the new growth of the nation, tens of thousands of people began moving west. They built houses, started farms, and created towns.

“And it was the first time in world history, really, that any sovereign state had granted so much land to people that were not of noble birth. And this expanded the strength of the Americans population. For the first time now thousands, tens of thousands, of Americans became landowners. With ownership of land, these people were now Americans. Thousands of them were able to vote for the first time, were able to run for office for the first time, and really direct the course of their communities and their nations. It empowered the American people and they absolutely worshiped Monroe for his efforts.”

Harlow Unger says that with the strength and unity of the American people behind him, Monroe could make an important decision about international

relations. The issue was the rebelling Spanish colonies in South America.

The king of Spain did not want the United States to recognize the colonies' independence. And, Spain asked European countries to help it put down the rebellions.

Britain wanted no part of the Spanish proposal. It was trading heavily with these new Latin American countries. Spanish or even French control of this area would destroy or limit this trade.

So Britain proposed a joint statement with the United States to say that neither country wanted any of Spain's territory in the New World. Britain also wanted the United States to join in opposing the handover of any of Spain's American territories to any other power in Europe.

Most of President Monroe's advisers urged him to accept the British offer. Secretary of State Adams opposed it. He did not believe the United States should tie itself to any European power, even Britain.

Monroe accepted the advice of his secretary of state. He included Adams' ideas in his message to Congress in December 1823. This part of the message became known as the Monroe Doctrine.

The president said no European power should, in the future, try to establish a colony anywhere in the Americas. He said the political system of the European powers was very different from that of the Americas. Monroe said any attempt to extend this European system to any of the Americas would

threaten the peace and safety of the United States.

The president also said the United States had not interfered with the colonies of any European power in South America and would not do so in the future.

But, Monroe added, a number of these former colonies had become independent countries. And the United States had recognized their independence. We would see it as an unfriendly act, he said, for any European power to try to oppress or control these new American countries in any way.

At the same time, Monroe said, the United States never had -- and never would -- take part in any war among the European powers. This statement by Monroe was only part of a presidential message to Congress. But it clearly stated one of the most important of America's foreign policies.

The country was enjoying a time of good feelings under Monroe. But an old problem was about to return and divide the country again. The question of slavery in new states will be our story next week.

I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us next time for The Making of a Nation – American history from VOA Learning English.