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## The Monroe Doctrine: An Instance Of America's Colonial Discourse

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### Abstract

This article aims to prove that the Monroe Doctrine (1823) made a significant contribution to the formation of the foreign policy of The United States of America. Originally, the Monroe Doctrine advocated isolationism for defensive reasons. But the doctrine and its consequences have become a "clear" call for intervention not only in the American continent but throughout the world. Through this article, we will show how the doctrine became the basis of American foreign policy. Using colonial and postcolonial discourse, we will analyze Monroe's discourse and relate it to United States history. We will end our article with an assessment of the Monroe Doctrine in the past and present.

**keywords:** Monroe Doctrine, foreign policy, postcolonial discourse, The United States of America

### Introduction

The present paper is entitled: The Monroe Doctrine: An Instance of America's Colonial Discourse. Our aim is to demonstrate that the Monroe Doctrine (1823) had greatly contributed into the shaping of the United States foreign policy. The Doctrine was initially a political speech that President Monroe made on the state of the Union. It was later taken back by later American politicians to the extent of becoming one of the pillars of U.S foreign policy. We will show how the doctrine has become through the 'successive years' the basis of the nation's foreign policy. Originally calling for isolationism for defensive reasons, the doctrine and its corollaries became a 'clear' call for interventionism not only in the American continent but all around the world. It is worth mentioning that the doctrine has helped determine the future attitude of the USA as regards the world's affairs. In our paper we will highlight the importance of the doctrine on both ideological and political levels.

We will proceed as follows, first by giving a definition of colonial and postcolonial discourse and will link this to U.S history. Then we will give a definition of the Monroe Doctrine and its principles. As regards this particular section, we will support our analysis by linking the original speech to its aspects of political document. Then we will end our article by making an assessment of the Monroe doctrine past and present. Even if it 'seems' that the doctrine had once started as a 'nationalistic' call to defend the USA, it became through time

America's most efficient justification for interventionism around the world. This doctrine has led to the emergence of a new kind of hegemonic political and ideological power in the North American continent and the country has succeeded in spreading it all around the world. Even if reshaped through the years the core of the American foreign policy precepts seems to have been taken from the Monroe doctrine to this day.

## DEFINITIONS

### What Is Colonial Discourse?

The 2006 ["Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy"](#) "uses the term 'colonialism' to describe the process of European settlement and political control over the rest of the world, including Americas, Australia, and parts of Africa and Asia." It discusses the distinction between colonialism and imperialism and states that,

"[g]iven the difficulty of consistently distinguishing between the two terms, this entry will use colonialism as a broad concept that refers to the project of European political domination from the sixteenth to the twentieth century that ended with the national liberation movements of the 1960s."

### Colonialism and Imperialism

A colony is part of an empire and so colonialism is closely related to [imperialism](#). Assumptions are that colonialism and imperialism are interchangeable, however Robert Young suggests that imperialism is the concept while colonialism is the practice. Colonialism is based on an imperial outlook, thereby creating a consequential relationship. Through an empire, colonialism is established and capitalism is expanded, on the other hand a capitalist economy naturally enforces an empire.

### Post-colonialism

Post-colonialism (or post-colonial theory) can refer to a set of theories in philosophy and literature that grapple with the legacy of colonial rule. In this sense, postcolonial literature may be considered a branch of [postmodern literature](#) concerned with the political and cultural independence of peoples formerly subjugated in colonial empires. Many practitioners take [Edward Saïd](#)'s book [Orientalism](#) (1978) as the theory's founding work (although French theorists such as [Aimé Césaire](#) and [Frantz Fanon](#) made similar claims decades before Saïd).

### American Imperialism

It is a term referring to the economic, military and cultural influence of the United States on other countries. The concept of an American Empire was first popularized during the presidency of [James K. Polk](#) who led the United States into the [Mexican–American War](#) of 1846 and the eventual annexation of the territories like California and the [Gadsden purchase](#). (Wikipedia.org).

## **What Is the Monroe Doctrine?**

The Monroe Doctrine was originally a political speech that President James Monroe addressed with Congress for his annual message to Congress. Both the president and the then secretary of state John Quincy Adams worked on the speech. In the speech the president made clear that the destiny of the United States of America had to be considered 'separate' from the one of Europe and that the present government would do its best to protect the sovereignty of the nation. In the aftermath of the War of 1812, Monroe's speech appeared to be a confident expression of what America and the Americans had become. The speech carries the feeling of pride and 'political maturity' that the United States had reached at that time. The speech was just an overt confirmation of the wide spread spirit of nationalism among the American people that their 'democratic' institutions reflected at that time.

The Monroe Doctrine is an essentially nationalistic declaration; it embodied the concept of two separate hemispheres. On the one hand it stated that the American continent was not to be considered as an area for future colonization by European powers and that European intervention in the affairs of the New World would be regarded as a manifestation of unfriendliness towards the United States. On the other hand it assured the European powers that the United States would not involve itself in their internal affairs. (Jones,1995:110/111)

In addition, Monroe's speech even if it called for respect of the sovereignty of the United States and the 'evident' respect of the latter of the European presence outside its borders, the message carries also the expression of eventual defense of the U.S territory in case of any 'attempted' aggression of its lands by any foreign power. It can be noted that the speech holds also the expression of neutrality and interventionism in the name of democracy and liberty of the oppressed peoples of the Latin American continent.

It discouraged future European colonization in the Americas and insisted that Europeans should not attempt to reconquer Latin American republics that had become independent. In return, the president promised that the United States would avoid intervening in European affairs. By the close of the 19th century, the Monroe Doctrine had become a fundamental principle of U.S. diplomacy, which many considered a justification for U.S. dominance of the Western Hemisphere.(J. Dobson:21)

## **Principles of the Monroe Doctrine**

1/ Sovereignty of the United States of America and a reminder of its neutrality policy vis- a - vis the affairs of Europe.

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. (Dobson, 2009:23)

2/ the exceptionality of the American political system and the government: a reminder of the sacrifices for liberty. In the rest of the world, people are under monarchical regimes while in the USA, they enjoy the benefits of liberty.

The political system of the allied powers is essentially different in this respect from that of America. (Dobson, 2009:23)

3/ Any attempt to the liberty of the American continent is regarded as an act of aggression, that is unacceptable by the U.S.

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. (Dobson, 2009:23)

4/ the document states also, the non-intervention of the USA in the affairs of the already existing empires on the American continent in case of trouble. "With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power we have not interfered and shall not interfere." (Dobson, 2009:23)

5/ But with clearly independent nations of Latin America, the United states will defend them against their aggressors for the people have their right to liberty and democracy.

But with the Governments who have declared their independence and maintain it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.( Dobson, 2009:23)

### **The Discursive Aspects behind the Monroe Doctrine**

The origin of the Monroe Doctrine started as a political speech that was delivered in December 1823, by President Monroe to Congress. This political speech encloses three clear strategies of language use and political discourse. Relying on Chilton's categorization, we can come up with the following aspects that are meant to clarify the then 'current' position of the U.S regarding any 'future' colonial European schemes or conquest of its lands or evermore of the Latin American Territory. The speech comprises the following discursive aspects.

#### **Coercion**

That the U.S would not allow any attempt on the part of Europe in its internal affairs or the affairs of the 'newly' independent Latin American nations. By coercion, the U.S would defend itself by all means, the use of arms included, in the face of any colonial power.

#### **Legitimization and De-legitimization**

As regards the current U.S position of the time, the speech legitimizes the U.S attitude of defense and security claims on the basis of this being the right of any 'sovereign and independent' nation. The U.S legitimizes their position of 'guardian angel' of the Latin American nations in the name of democracy. Without their search for democracy the U.S would not have existed and it is clear that it would stand in the face of any transgressors.

### **Representation and misrepresentation**

The U.S is represented as the 'friend' as long as there would be no threat to its liberties. The U.S will respect the already existing presence of Colonials in the American continent but will never allow a furthering of any colonial schemes where liberty was proclaimed. All this as the U.S claimed would be done in the name of democracy. In the same speech, however, there is a blunt de-legitimization of the European attempts to remain in the American continent. In other words, the U.S are represented as the 'saviours' of the world, whereas Europe is represented as the oppressors of the 'free' world. Thus,

In making an argument, the (U.S) anticipate and counter a possible opposition argument. In so doing, they are dialogic; undermining potential opposition before an opposing position is even articulated. ((Blackledge, 2005:94)

Chilton for his part remarks that "legitimization *is* linked to coercion, establishing power through the discursive claim to legitimacy," (Blackledge, 2005:97) and in order to achieve its discursive aims, the speech is built upon what Bourdieu qualifies as 'an abundance of tangible self-evidences.' (Ibid:97) For concerning the position of the U.S their purpose was as obvious and evident as were the principles that contributed in the building of the nation and its democracy: the right for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

### **Conclusion**

It is worth mentioning that what the Monroe Doctrine was originally set for was not respected by the U.S governments of the time. The United States government refused in the past and despite the Monroe Doctrine 'requirements' any entanglements with the Latin American countries or worse their disputes with one another.

Where major disputes arose between Latin American states, the US government deliberately chose to adopt a cautious and mainly reactive policy...Determined to avoid foreign entanglements and to be seen to be acting even-handedly. (J.Smith:22)

In the years which followed the American Civil War, the Monroe Doctrine was shaped and reshaped into various other political 'strategies' which in their core kept the essence of the doctrine. However, updates were made on every single occasion to legitimize the U.S expansionist and territorial spread around the world (the World Wars, the Cold War, the Vietnam and Korean Wars; and recently, the U.S intervention in Irak and Afghanistan. The basis of the United States foreign policy became clear cut that in the face of what the U.S would consider as a 'threat to liberty', the American government would be allowed to make the 'necessary' decisions in the face of what the U.S would qualify as a 'wrongdoing.' The

following extract is taken from what is known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine:

All that this country desires is to see the neighboring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous. Any country whose people conduct themselves well can count upon our hearty friendship. If a nation shows that it knows how to act with reasonable efficiency and decency in social and political matters, if it keeps order and pays its obligations, it need fear no interference from the United States. Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power. (Livingstone,2009:12)

This is a clear reminder of the Monroe Doctrine in which President Roosevelt (1858/1919) makes the world remember that the United States of America would not save its power in the face of aggression, in the name of democracy. Unfortunately, the international conflicts that emerged in the Post War Era gave the U.S the right to exercise its power around the globe and thus, the legitimatization of the spread of its 'capitalistic hegemony.'

The previous question was how could one possibly qualify the Monroe Doctrine? Can it be said to represent an instance of colonial discourse, in the light of what the United States tried to achieve around the globe ever since its independence. The Doctrine in this respect and knowing the very character and the nature of the American Revolution could be said to be postcolonial in scope and aim also, calling for the end of Eurocentric 'colonial' attitudes. The Doctrine could be regarded as an instance of the U.S's purpose to defend and preserve itself from the control of the European powers of that time. However, in the manner the doctrine claims the defense of the 'oppressed people' of the Latin American continent this can be illustrative of the U.S imperialistic quests especially, that the period was characterized by 'Manifest Destiny.' Manifest Destiny is but an update of the Monroe Doctrine and the justification of the United States government of the time to lead the Mexican American War (1846/1848), and which resulted in the acquisition of a 'vast' western empire in the North American continent.

Besides, the Monroe Doctrine is a later call on the part of the United States for the world at large to welcome 'the' new world 'hegemony' that the U.S would represent henceforth. Thus the doctrine would provide an end to the speculations surrounding the still ongoing U.S presence under the Eurocentric means of reflection and power structures. But in the way the United States had worked to achieve its position and in the way it succeeded in shaping the destiny of the 'present' world, one can easily be reminded of the concept of imperialism because wherever the U.S intervene in the name of liberty and democracy, there appears also its 'profit making and power seeking' schemes. The United States 'rescue missions' around the world speak for themselves.

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