

James Monroe's Presidency: The Monroe Doctrine

The End of the Federalist Party

By the 1816 election, the Democratic-Republicans dominated Congress and the presidency. Virginia also dominated the executive office, with all but one of the first five presidents having come from that state! James Monroe, a Democratic-Republican from Virginia and the last Revolutionary War veteran elected president, won by a landslide, inheriting the Era of Good Feelings.

What happened to the Federalist Party? Clearly, part of their problem was that they had been on the wrong side of things for a few years. However, in other ways, they just were not needed anymore. Think about it in today's terms, and put aside any cynicism. Suppose a Democrat president, for example, instituted several major policies that had always been part of the Republican platform and then his or her two successors continued to do the same thing. Would Republican or independent voters be seriously opposed to that? In addition, if people in the President's own party could admit that the policies had been the right decision; wouldn't he or she have most everyone's support? In the early part of the 19th century, the nation had solved its biggest political conflicts. Why did they need two parties at the moment?

Both Presidents Jefferson and Madison had taken actions that contradicted the party's commitment to a small federal government in favor of Federalist positions that extended the power of the presidency and the federal government. Nevertheless, many Americans felt that actions like the Louisiana Purchase and the National Bank had indeed benefited the nation. President James Monroe adopted this pragmatic approach to governing - for example, supporting a standing military and promoting industry - and he tried to continue the nation's political unity by appointing people from different regions of the country to government positions.

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In Monroe's first term, he also increased the nation's borders. Having served as an ambassador, governor, Secretary of State and Secretary of War, Monroe was an expert negotiator. Soon after taking office, his administration approved the **Rush-Bagot Treaty**. This agreement between Britain and the United States disarmed the Great Lakes and later gave both nations joint control over the Oregon Territory. This meant that for the first time American territory reached from sea to shining sea.

Then, tensions started to flare at America's southern end between Native Americans and U.S. settlers as well as military forces passing through Florida. In 1818, General Andrew Jackson invaded, and some of his actions violated international law. This interfered with negotiations already under way to purchase Florida from Spain. However, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams knew that Spain was not in a military position to win back the land since they were fighting several colonial independence movements, and he crafted a carefully written

politician's apology. The U.S. government offered to return the captured land but also blamed Spain for the problems and suggested that they either learn to control the colony or just give it to America. In the subsequent **Adams-Onís Treaty**, Spain did just that. All of Florida was ceded to the United States in exchange for the U.S. government acquiring Spanish debts owed to private citizens. The treaty also resolved some border disputes in the Southwest.

The nation enjoyed widespread contentment under James Monroe until 1819, when a financial panic hit. Although historians debate the specific causes, it is generally agreed that this was the first recession that originated within the United States and was likely a result of policies established under previous administrations. Still, Monroe was elected without opposition, receiving every electoral vote but one (legend has it the lone dissenter only voted for someone else so that Washington would have the honor of being the only unanimously elected president). Monroe's second term, however, was more controversial.