

Foreign relations in the Americas, 1810–1823

The United States was surprised and heartened by the independence wars that began in Spanish America. However, its attitude towards the wars was inhibited by its relations with Europe. Just as the Napoleonic wars were the catalyst for these independence movements, so they also brought about perceived opportunities for the United States. But the United States did not take the formal step of recognizing the Spanish American states. Seeking to take advantage of British distractions in Europe, the United States fought and lost the War of 1812 against the British. Its formal reactions to independence were subordinated by its disputes with Britain.

The Spanish American wars were certainly helpful to the United States as they weakened Spanish ties to areas that were of interest to them, such as Florida. The US government adopted a very genial attitude towards the revolutionaries as early as 1810. And, while they did not formally recognize the new governments, they encouraged them and advised them on how to purchase arms, munitions and ships to further the cause of independence. There was, however, no direct involvement of North Americans in Spanish America.

The United States had three sound reasons for this support: expansionist aims, trade with the provinces and ideological sympathy. The first two give evidence of US aims in light of their war with Britain and the changes in trade that they faced after their own independence. The last was equally important; Americans wanted to see the Spanish American independence movements succeed so that other countries could benefit from their form of government and their freedom from empire.

After their loss to the British in 1815, the United States had no desire to fight what might mean another war against a European power. Helping Spanish America to liberate itself was too risky. Thus, the United States adopted a policy of formal neutrality and recognized Fernando VII as leader of Spanish America after his restoration. The US government placed informal agents in all of the main cities of Spanish America rather than the official consuls that were placed in other foreign countries.

Nonetheless, illegal support for the revolutionaries continued, often encouraged by the US government, who counseled the Spanish American patriots on how to purchase arms and munitions. US merchants traded with them, providing them with necessary goods. Ships were built in the United States and then exported to the south (so long as they were unarmed when they left the United States). In fact, US neutrality laws were repeatedly violated by US merchants.

Although the Spanish ambassador Luis de Onís protested against these actions, he realized that the United States would not enforce neutrality unless it stood to gain from doing so. The United States wanted Spain to withdraw from Florida and Texas. Unless the Spanish took this seriously, they would gain no headway regarding violations of neutrality. Taking advantage of Spanish weakness, the

United States invaded Florida in 1818 under the pretext of pacifying natives who had crossed the frontier into the US. The combination of events led to the Adams–Onís Treaty in 1819; both countries agreed to cancel all claims they had on each other and Spain relinquished Florida and the Mississippi River as the US frontier was extended further west.

In the meantime, Spanish American independence was gaining in popularity among US citizens who were intrigued by the battles waged by San Martín and Bolívar. They read about these in local newspapers and began to agitate for their government's recognition of the new countries. Those with influence appealed to the United States government for recognition but events in Spanish America made the administration cautious. In the early 1820s, a rebel victory was an uncertainty and the United States did not want to alienate Spain if in the end they defeated the revolutionaries. Secretary of state John Quincy Adams argued that recognition did not come from the right to independence, but the certainty of it. In 1822, the probability of independence was much higher and so the United States officially recognized the states of Gran Colombia and Mexico. The United States was the first country outside of Spanish America to recognize the new nations.

The Monroe Doctrine

On December 2, 1823, James Monroe, president of the United States, gave his annual message to Congress, and in it he addressed the relationship between the Americas and Europe. This part of his address is now known as the Monroe Doctrine and the core ideas expressed therein became the center of continental relations for over a century.

Just as Spain and Portugal were losing their colonies, other European countries seemed poised to act and expand in the Americas. Most threatening to the United States were the Russians, who had claimed the Pacific coast from Alaska down to the 51st parallel (and coastal waters 100 miles from the Bering Strait), and the French, whom the US feared sought to reassert themselves as a world power through further expansion.

As Latin American countries became independent, the United States saw opportunities for good relations, the formation of other democracies and the spread of commerce all in the Western Hemisphere. At the same time Europe saw the Americas as open territories; all had interests in the region and a certain amount of strength, especially in the Caribbean. North Americans feared that European intervention in the south could lead to intervention in the north.

The British had been hoping to make a joint declaration with the United States that would prevent further European expansion in the Americas but the US decided to act alone. The Monroe Doctrine originated as a statement of the right of self-protection; it was not directed at European possessions in the region but intended to prevent other powers from taking advantage of the newly independent states of Latin America. It was also an attempt at

1 • Independence movements

pacification: since its inception the United States had been at war three times and Latin America had been in conflict since 1803.

The Monroe Doctrine warned Europe to stay out of the affairs of the Western hemisphere. It stated that the United States would not tolerate further colonization or puppet governments in the Americas. It further stated that European powers should stay out of hemispheric affairs. There was no clear policy on what the United States would do if the Monroe Doctrine were violated but the European powers accepted it, and it became policy.

Initially, the Latin American countries liked the doctrine; Colombia and Brazil endorsed it themselves. At the end of a long, costly struggle, continental solidarity seemed desirable ideologically and pragmatically. However, it would soon come clear to them that the North Americans were ambitious and openly imperialistic; they sought much of the same territory that they were ostensibly protecting from European encroachment. After initial jubilation, Latin Americans came to view the policy warily. It did not prevent expansion; it warned off the Europeans so that the North Americans could expand themselves.