

17 That Good President Monroe

James Monroe
PRESIDENT, 1817-1825



At Monroe's swearing-in for his second term as president the band played "Hail to the Chief"—the first time that song was played for a president. "Hail to the Chief" was the work of two Scotsmen: the composer, James Sanderson, wrote the tune to accompany lines from a poem by the famous writer Sir Walter Scott.

Our country is like a new house, said Monroe. "We lack many things, but we possess the most precious of all—liberty!"

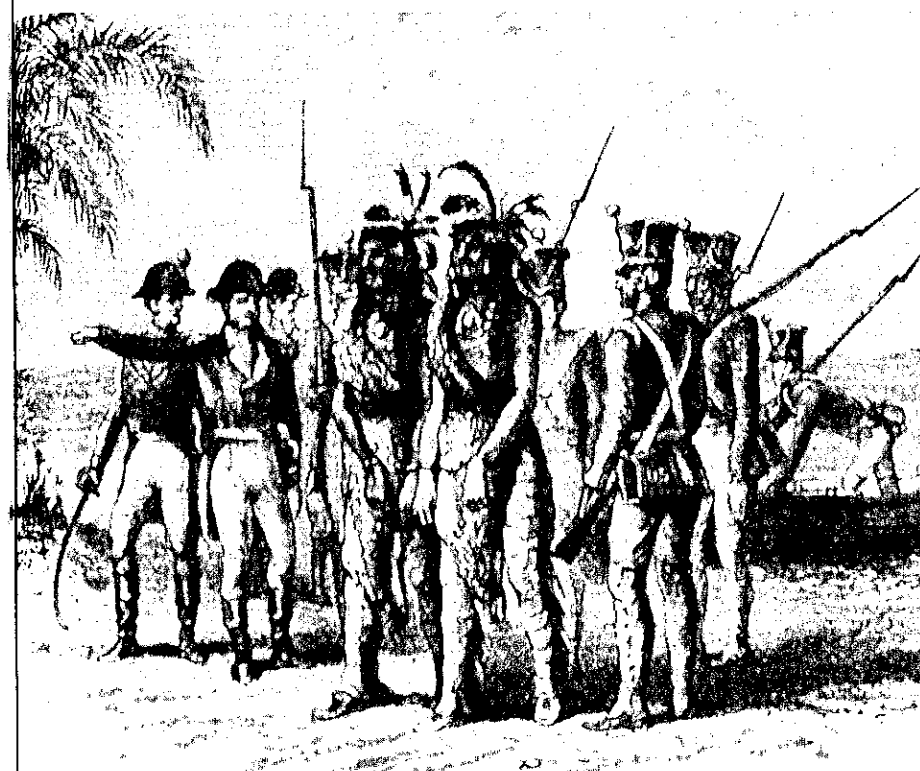
James Monroe reminded some people of George Washington. He was another tall, courtly Virginian, and so honest that Thomas Jefferson said you could turn his soul inside out and "there would not be a spot on it."

When Monroe became our fifth president, in March 1817, he was already being called the "last of the Revolutionary farmers." Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison were all unusual farmers: each loved and understood the land, each revered book learning, and each believed it was his duty to serve his country. James Monroe was the same kind of man.

People liked him. It made them feel good to have a president who was handsome and kindly, who had fought bravely as a soldier in the Revolutionary War, who had studied law with Thomas Jefferson, and who had served in the Virginia General Assembly when the Constitution was ratified.

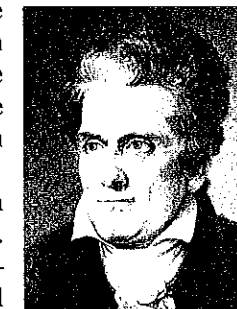
Monroe wore knee pants and silver buckles on his shoes, even though those styles were old-fashioned by the time he was president. He was tall and gangly, with wide-set gray eyes and a large nose. He had been raised in a privileged home where he was trained to be a leader and to help others.

Some important things happened during his presidency. One important thing was that the United States got Florida from Spain.



General Andrew Jackson captured these two Seminole chiefs after his men raised a British flag on a U.S. gunboat. The soldiers were engaging in trickery. The Seminoles paddled out expecting to find their English friends. Instead they met Americans who took them ashore and hanged them.

Southern planter John C. Calhoun (below), who was Monroe's secretary of war, started out as a strong believer in the union of states. He was a "war hawk" during the War of 1812, and an expansionist (he thought the country should grow as much as it could). In 1820 Calhoun agreed to the Missouri Compromise, even though it outlawed slavery north of latitude 36°30' (where is that?). But Calhoun changed. Maybe it was because he never got to be president (his big ambition); maybe it was because the price of cotton fell and with it some of the South's power. Calhoun began talking of states' rights and individual liberty (but not liberty for slaves). He became a Southern planter first and a U.S. citizen second. Keep Calhoun in your mind. He will be very important in the national drama to come.



(That is especially important if you happen to live in Florida.) Spain—such a mighty country in Columbus's time—had become weak.

Slaves had been fleeing to Spanish-held Florida, where they lived in all-black villages or in bi-racial Seminole communities. Suppose you were a slave, and willing to risk the dangers of running away. If you lived in Virginia, or Maryland, or Kentucky, you would probably head north and try to make it to Canada. But if you lived in South Carolina, or Georgia, or Alabama, you wouldn't have much chance of escape if you went north. If you headed the other way, and were lucky, you might just get to Florida. There the Seminole Indians would protect you. You can see why the Southern slave owners hated the Seminoles. And they were angry with the Spaniards for not making the Seminoles return their runaways.

In 1817, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun sent General Andrew Jackson into Florida. Jackson was on Spanish soil; he was only supposed to capture runaway slaves, but he did



Monroe was ambassador to France during the French Revolution. The Marquis de Lafayette and his wife had been imprisoned by the revolutionaries. Monroe's wife, Elizabeth (*above*), visited Madame Lafayette in prison on the day she was to be executed. The French, who wanted to stay friendly with America, were so impressed that they set Madame Lafayette free.

As the power of the United States grew, the Monroe Doctrine became more and more important. But when Monroe first made his speech, a lot of people in Europe sneered at the idea of this upstart new country telling them what to do in South America. What really kept most European nations away was fear of the mighty British navy.

more than that. He had learned to fight as the Indians fought. He burned villages and destroyed crops. He captured, killed, and humiliated the Seminoles. His White Stick Creek Indian allies fought with him. More than half his soldiers were Creeks. It was the First Seminole War. Osceola, who was now 14, was taken prisoner (but later released).

Some Americans were upset. They thought Jackson had gone too far. The Spaniards were really upset. John Quincy Adams was President Monroe's secretary of state. He offered Spain a deal. He said the United States would pay Spain \$5 million for Florida. (Spain could still hold Texas and California and other western regions.) The Spaniards signed John Quincy Adams's treaty. They had no choice; Spain was too weak to fight. General Andrew Jackson was named governor of the new U.S. territory: Florida. It was 1821.

Lots of people in the United States couldn't wait to move to Florida. But what about the Seminoles? They had to make way for the white settlers. They were forced to move south to an inland reservation on sandy, barren land where crops hardly grew at all. Soon many were starving. The young man, Osceola, went south with the others. He was now a military chief, a *tustenugee*, a kind of policeman.

Florida wasn't the only place where Spain lost out. Spain and Portugal could no longer control their colonies in South and Central America. One by one they had revolutions. They became independent nations. As soon as that happened, other European countries began to look greedily at those new Latin-American nations. James Monroe and John Quincy Adams decided something needed to be done to keep Europe out of the Americas.

In December 1823 President Monroe gave a speech to Congress. He said that the American continents were closed to other nations. He told the European countries that they were not welcome to look for colonies in this hemisphere. The United States will not interfere in Europe's affairs, said Monroe, so Europe should keep its hands off America. That speech is very famous. What he said is called the "Monroe Doctrine." It has been American policy since the days of James Monroe.

The years that Monroe was president have been called an "Era of Good Feelings." Most things were going well in the country. The old fight between the Hamiltonian Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans seemed to have died down.

But it is hard to have people and politics without having arguments, and, before long, people were fussing about politics again. And now there were new parties and new arguments.