

# Introduction

James Monroe (1758–1831), born and educated in Virginia, was a soldier, a statesman, and the fifth president of the United States. He attended the College of William and Mary but left at age eighteen to join the Virginia regiment of the Continental Army as a lieutenant. Although he was wounded at the Battle of Trenton, he went on to become an aide to the Earl of Sterling with the rank of major. In 1780 he returned to Virginia, where he studied law under Governor Thomas Jefferson until 1783. The two men remained close friends until Jefferson's death in 1826.

Monroe's political life began with his election to the Virginia legislature in 1782. In the following year he was elected to the Congress of the Confederation, the national governing body created under the Articles of Confederation. When his term expired he returned to the Virginia legislature. In 1788 he was elected to the state convention to ratify the Constitution, which he opposed because he feared that it gave too much power to the federal government.

Monroe lost when he ran against James Madison for election to the First Congress. However, when a vacancy arose in the Senate in 1790, Monroe was chosen to fill it. Critical of Washington's administration, he opposed a number of presidential appointments as well as the establishment of the Bank of the United States. He left the Senate in 1794 to serve as minister to France, assigned the task of quieting French suspicions about American treaty negotiations with Great Britain. In the end he pleased neither the French government nor the American administration and, upon his return, published *A View of the Conduct of the Executive, in the Foreign Affairs of the United States*.

A term as governor of Virginia from 1799 until December 1802 briefly interrupted Monroe's diplomatic career. Early in 1803, President Thomas Jefferson sent him to France and then to Spain to negotiate the Louisiana Purchase and to determine the exact boundaries of Florida. The negotiations with Spain were particularly vexing. Equally difficult, however, was Monroe's next assignment in 1805 in London, where he was sent to straighten out the matter of seizure of neutral American vessels and the impressment of American seamen by Great Britain.

After his return, Monroe allowed himself to be put forward as a presidential candidate in the election of 1808, supported by several more radical members of the Republican Party, but he lost badly to Federalist James Madison. In 1809, Jefferson convinced Madison to offer Monroe the governorship of upper Louisiana, which Monroe refused. In 1810, he returned to the Virginia legislature and in January 1811 became governor for a second time. Then, in March 1811, Madison, in need of political allies in Virginia, appointed Monroe secretary of state.

Among the difficulties that Monroe faced in his new position were solving the problems posed by American neutrality regarding European wars and ironing out relations with Great Britain. In the latter, Monroe failed, and in June 1812 war was declared. Although the Orders in Council, which restricted neutral trade with Europe and allowed stopping and searching American vessels on the high seas, were eventually withdrawn, Monroe continued to justify the war on the grounds of impressments. However, he was willing to accept Russian mediation when it was offered and supported the Treaty of Ghent which ended the war. After serving as both secretary of state and secretary of war from August 1814 to March 1817 and with several

dramatic military victories to his credit (including those at Plattsburg and New Orleans), Monroe was in line for the presidency.

Monroe won the 1816 election by a narrow margin. Among the domestic issues confronting the administration during his two terms were the questions of internal improvements and of slavery. Although Monroe vetoed a bill calling for federal funding and oversight of improvements on the Cumberland Road, he issued a statement arguing that the federal government should have limited power to raise money for public works that would affect the common defense and the general welfare. Monroe's administration also presided over the famous Missouri compromise of 1820. Although Monroe had southern sympathies, he did not enter into the bitter congressional debate about the Missouri bill until it came to him for signature. He would have vetoed any bill that subjected Missouri to admission under restriction; the bill he signed admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. Slavery was to be excluded from Louisiana Purchase lands north of latitude 36°30'.

In 1820, Monroe was reelected with all but one electoral vote. It was during his annual message to Congress on December 2, 1823, that he presented the first version of what would later become known as the Monroe Doctrine: that American continents were "not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers." His declaration was prompted by Russian claims to all land that extended 100 miles into the Pacific above the 51st parallel and also by claims by France and Spain, which, in the face of South American and Latin American rebellions, were attempting to reassert their power in the Western Hemisphere. Although the Monroe Doctrine was invoked infrequently in the decades immediately following its articulation, it became one of the most powerful and functional statements of American foreign policy.

After leaving the presidency, Monroe returned to Virginia and was elected to the state's constitutional convention in 1829, becoming its presiding officer. In the spring of 1830, after his wife's death, he moved to New York City to live with his daughter and her husband. He died there on July 4, 1831.