

James Monroe during the War of 1812

The role generally focused on in the War of 1812 for James Monroe is that of Secretary of State. While the diplomacy of the war is the primary subject where Monroe had the most influence, it was hardly the only role he filled in the course of the war. As a cabinet member in James Madison's administration and in various other ways, Monroe influenced the diplomacy, strategy, and even the fighting of the War of 1812.

James Monroe had considerable experience negotiating with the representatives of European nations prior to Madison appointing him Secretary of State in 1811. Monroe, in fact, had been a challenger for the presidency in the 1808 election, but Madison won out and persuaded his fellow Virginian to join his cabinet as war loomed with Britain. Monroe's diplomatic resume prior to becoming Secretary of State included being part of the team President Jefferson sent to negotiate the Louisiana Purchase; along with William Pinkney, he also helped to negotiate a treaty with Great Britain in 1806. Had Jefferson submitted the treaty to the Senate in 1806, it is likely that the United States would not have declared war on Britain in 1812. The Monroe-Pinkney Treaty would have renewed the terms of the Jay Treaty of 1794 in which Britain made restitution to ship owners whose cargo had been seized by the British navy. The treaty also took a significant step in normalizing trade relations between the two nations for the first time since the revolution ended in 1783. While most Republican followers of Thomas Jefferson rejected the original treaty negotiated by John Jay as a betrayal of American principles, the agreement reduced tensions and prevented war for a decade.

Nearly all of the external problems Monroe faced as Secretary of State revolved around the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) and American neutrality. The United States had proclaimed its neutrality in European affairs as early as George Washington's administration; however, actually getting the two most powerful nations of Europe to recognize American neutrality while they duked it out for hegemony on a world stage was more complicated than anyone wanted to admit. The two sticking points in any negotiations Monroe led with Great Britain, both holdovers from previous administrations, were impressment and the Orders in Council which Britain instituted in response to Napoleon's Berlin Decree.

Another point of tensions in Anglo-American relations was the *Chesapeake Affair* (1807). Technically Monroe deserves credit for reaching a diplomatic solution to the controversy created by the incident. Britain returned the sailors its naval forces took from the American vessel that were still alive and offered restitution for the material damages the commander of the *Leopard* inflicted on the *Chesapeake*. However, Monroe could not get the British government to cease the controversial practice of impressment. Try as he might, British diplomats continued to cite the 'rule of 1756' that permitted Great Britain to seize deserters for its navy. At the heart of the issue were the trading rights of neutral powers, which Americans argued the British repeatedly violated. British intransigence on the issue of impressment brought a declaration of war in June of 1812—a shocking announcement which Monroe made to British minister Augustus J. Foster.

Once war began between the United States and Great Britain, Secretary of State James Monroe looked not to his duties as an advisor to President Madison, but for opportunities to lead

armed forces; Monroe hoped to take field command in 1812. Monroe's dreams of personally leading an American army to victory over the British persisted throughout the war of 1812, though he never did see command.

As all the members of Madison's administration would learn, managing the war proved more difficult than any predicted at the start. When war was declared there was little consensus as to what the war aims of the United States should be outside of invading Canada. An invasion of Canada had two purposes. Idealistically, Americans hoped to invade their northern neighbor for liberation purposes as much as territorial gain. Many Americans foolishly believed that Canadians would side with the United States in a war with Britain. As they were to learn, this American assumption could not have been more wrong. The second purpose in invading Canada was to gain leverage over Britain; a successful occupation of Canada would give Monroe the carrot he needed to force the British to acknowledge American trade rights. On this count, history will never know if Monroe could have persuaded the British to concede the point on impressment because Americans failed repeatedly to wrest Canada from British hands. It is worth noting, though, that lack of success in 1812 never dissuaded Monroe of the validity of a Canadian invasion. He continued to plot the conquest of Canada into 1815. The only success Monroe could claim by the end of 1812 on the diplomatic front was the first of several agreements regarding the treatment of prisoners of war made in November.

The year 1813 brought mixed results for the United States militarily. Monroe offered his input where he could, but he was not in charge of the war effort, and even on the diplomatic front, Madison sent other Americans as part of the peace delegation in 1813 hoping to make some headway with Russia as the mediator of the Anglo-American dispute. Monroe still hoped for command should the war continue.

Having made no progress on the frontier borders between the United States and Canada, British forces shifted their focus to the Chesapeake Bay. By this point the tide had turned against France and in favor of the British; thus, Great Britain could now focus more on the war in North America and moreover, shift campaign veterans from Spain to bring the war to Americans. As British strategy shifted so did Monroe's schemes to lead troops into battle. Monroe attempted to convince Madison to let him take charge on the frontier, but the idea was stillborn. Madison rejected the idea and Monroe let it slip quietly from any further discussion. Unfortunately for Monroe, he would have to wait for battle.

Britain had effectively employed its naval forces along the coast of the United States in 1813 and attacked throughout the Chesapeake Bay region. British cruisers operated with near immunity around the bay, and despite this fact neither the government nor its military leaders did anything to shore up defenses around the capitol or important bay-area cities like Baltimore. In August of 1814 British forces arrived with renewed vigor, particularly motivated to retaliate for alleged American atrocities in Canada such as the burning of towns along the border. There was strategic purpose in the move, too, as British commanders were instructed to "effect a diversion" that would benefit land forces in Upper Canada and the Great Lakes. General Robert Ross landed 4,500 men in Maryland and began moving on the capitol. American defenders made their stand at Bladensburg on 24 August 1814, and Monroe directly contributed to the events that day.

Monroe volunteered to be a cavalry scout in the engagement. When he arrived at Bladensburg he redeployed the defenders. Brigadier General Tobias Stansbury had already deployed his men in three lines; while his deployment was not ideal, Monroe rode in and repositioned the lines so that none could support any other as they were too far apart. Thus, when the British engaged the first line of defense, the militia broke and retreated. The second line withdrew under orders just as British soldiers attacked it. The battle turned into a rout and a clear path to Washington, D.C., itself, which the British would set fire to a few days later. Most blamed Secretary of War Armstrong for the calamity that befell the nation after Bladensburg; the burning of the White House was an international humiliation of the worst sort. Armstrong blamed Monroe for the fiasco of Bladensburg, and to some extent there is merit to the charge given the fact that Monroe poorly positioned the defenders. However, the lack of defensive preparations probably meant that the British attackers would have won at Bladensburg anyway; we'll never know for sure.

For Secretary Armstrong the insults were not over, as Madison asked James Monroe to take over as Secretary of War in December of 1814, a position he held until August of 1815 when William Crawford filled the post. While it may not have been intentional and Monroe likely overstepped his bounds, the secretary saw increased responsibilities and a small bit of action in 1814. The inability of the United States to make any real improvement in war or to get Britain to accept American demands brought a growing chorus of criticism and charges of corruption from opponents of the Republican-led war. As a result, Monroe would be both Secretary of State and Secretary of War by the end of 1814, even though the Secretary of War appointment was temporary. Monroe served in the role until after the war officially ended in 1815. As Secretary of War his strategy to winning and convincing Britain to accept American terms remained the same as it was in 1812—invade Canada. Monroe had refined his ideas a bit in this regard, rejecting the militia as a viable military option. The secretary called for 100,000 men in 1815; Monroe wanted 30,000 regulars and 70,000 volunteers to launch another invasion of Canada. Monroe concluded that militia forces were inefficient and inept when it came to offensive operations, a point illustrated by events in the Chesapeake Bay in the summer of 1814.

When the war ended, James Monroe multiplied his experiences during the war to succeed Madison in the presidency. Monroe applied the lessons of the War of 1812 by having his cabinet members reform the military and build better national defenses. His greatest triumph, arguably influenced by his roles in the war, was the doctrine that bears his name. An aggressive policy announcement, the Monroe Doctrine announced to the world that the United States would not tolerate intervention or colonization in the Western Hemisphere after 1823.

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