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# THE BIG STICK

Although the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 had proclaimed a special interest in Latin American affairs, it was neither militaristic nor especially interventionist in spirit. But the Spanish-American War signaled a new military and economic aggressiveness in Washington and a new determination to assert the country's ambitions. It was probably inevitable, therefore, that President Theodore Roosevelt should modify the Monroe Doctrine to provide a rationale for direct intervention by armed force on behalf of "progress" and "responsible government." A hero of the U.S. Army's recent Cuban campaign against Spain and an admirer of Admiral George Dewey, Roosevelt, who had succeeded the slain William McKinley as president, urged a policy of expanding the country's military might. Advising the United States to "speak softly and carry a big stick," Roosevelt believed the United States should act as the policeman of Central America and the Caribbean. Between Roosevelt's and Coolidge's administrations the United States sent warships and soldiers to several Caribbean countries, usually to protect U.S. investments, and in some cases left them there for decades.

Theodore Roosevelt, who inaugurated this era of gunboat diplomacy, was born to well-to-do parents in New York City in 1858. After college he juggled politics, writing, and ranching and hunting, until McKinley appointed him assistant secretary of the navy in 1897. He resigned in 1898 to lead a cavalry unit called the Rough Riders in Cuba, but returned to win the governorship of New York in 1899 and 1900. He moved on to the vice presidency in 1901, and in that same year to the presidency when McKinley was killed. Over the next ten years Roosevelt promised a "square deal" and a "new nationalism," both embodying his notions of social and military progress. In 1912 he bolted the Republican Party to head a Progressive ticket that lost to Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat, whose internationalism Roosevelt relentlessly castigated until his death in 1919.

**Questions to Consider.** The Monroe Doctrine had asserted the right of the United States to prevent foreign intervention in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere. Did Roosevelt's "corollary" seem to be concerned

mainly with external threats or with internal ones? According to the corollary, under what circumstances would the United States feel justified in interfering in Caribbean and Central American countries? Do you find Roosevelt's insistence on a U.S. right to intervene in this area to insure "reasonable efficiency and decency in social and political matters" valid and persuasive? Why did he describe unilateral U.S. intervention as the exercise of an "international police power"? Roosevelt argued that the interests of the United States and the Caribbean and Central American countries were in fact identical. Do you find this argument persuasive?

## Monroe Doctrine Corollary (1904)

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

It is not true that the United States feels any land hunger or entertains any projects as regards the other nations of the Western Hemisphere save such as are for their welfare. All that this country desires is to see the neighboring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous. Any country whose people conduct themselves well can count upon our hearty friendship. If a nation shows that it knows how to act with reasonable efficiency and decency in social and political matters, if it keeps order and pays its obligations, it need fear no interference from the United States. Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may lead the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power. If every country washed by the Caribbean Sea would show the progress in stable and just civilization which with the aid of the Platt amendment Cuba has shown since our troops left the island, and which so many of the republics in both Americas are constantly and brilliantly showing, all question of interference by this Nation with their affairs would be at an end. Our interests and those of our southern neighbors are in reality identical. They have great natural riches, and if within their borders the reign of law and justice obtains, prosperity is sure to come to them. While they thus obey the primary laws of civilized society they may rest assured that they will be treated by us in a spirit of cordial and helpful sympathy. We would interfere with them only in the last resort, and then only if it became evident

James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1897–1907), XVI: 7371–7377.

that their inability or unwillingness to do justice at home and abroad had violated the rights of the United States or had invited foreign aggression to the detriment of the entire body of American nations. It is a mere truism to say that every nation, whether in America or anywhere else, which desires to maintain its freedom, its independence, must ultimately realize that the right of such independence can not be separated from the responsibility of making good use of it.

In asserting the Monroe Doctrine, in taking such steps as we have taken in regard to Cuba, Venezuela, and Panama, and in endeavoring to circumscribe the theater of war in the Far East, and to secure the open door in China, we have acted in our own interest as well as in the interest of humanity at large. There are, however, cases in which, while our own interests are not greatly involved, strong appeal is made to our sympathies. . . . In extreme cases action may be justifiable and proper. What form the action shall take must depend upon the circumstances of the case; that is, upon the degree of the atrocity and upon our power to remedy it.