

PRIMARY SOURCE

John Quincy Adams, “Monsters to Destroy” Speech

Building Context

On July 4, 1821, John Quincy Adams was serving as the secretary of state under President James Monroe. Adams gave a speech to celebrate Independence Day and to explain his view about American foreign policy principles to a wide audience. This speech contains some of the ideas that later became central to President Monroe’s Doctrine for foreign policy. As stated in the video, there were three prongs to that Doctrine:

1. First, the United States warned that the Western hemisphere was “henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European power.”
2. Second, the United States would consider any European intervention in the Western hemisphere to be “dangerous to our peace and safety” and they would respond accordingly depending on the circumstances.
3. Third, the United States in turn promised not to interfere in European affairs.

The selections of the 1821 speech included here go into more detail about those key points and the Founding principles that guided U.S. foreign policy.

Some key points that you will find in this source include:

- Adams establishes the history of the United States and its role in the world.
- He describes that the role of United States in foreign affairs is not usually as an active participant.
- He uses metaphors to further this point.
- He concludes with a call to action for the decision-makers in American foreign policy.

Directions: Review the essential vocabulary. Then, read the excerpts and answer the questions that follow.

Essential Vocabulary

vicissitudes	A fluctuation of state or condition
consecrated	Made or declared sacred
renounced	To give up, refuse, or resign
abstained	To choose not to do something
vindicator	Protector of something from attack or encroachment
avarice	Greed
usurp	To take or make use of something without right
maxims	A general truth, fundamental principle, or rule of conduct
insensibly	Without reason or sense
dominion	Supreme authority

John Quincy Adams, “Monsters to Destroy,” July 4, 1821

<https://jqas.org/jqas-monsters-to-destroy-speech-full-text/>

Text	Notes
In the progress of forty years since the acknowledgement of our Independence, we have gone through many modifications of internal government, and through all the vicissitudes of peace and war, with other powerful nations. But never, never for a moment have the great principles, consecrated by the Declaration of this day, been renounced or abandoned....	
America, in the assembly of nations, since her admission among them, ...has uniformly spoken ...the language of equal liberty, of equal justice, and of equal rights....	
She has, in the lapse of nearly half a century, without a single exception, respected the independence of other nations while asserting and maintaining her own. She has abstained from interference in the concerns of others, even when the conflict has been for principles...	

John Quincy Adams, “Monsters to Destroy,” July 4, 1821 (cont.)

<https://jqas.org/jqas-monsters-to-destroy-speech-full-text/>

Text	Notes
But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. ...	
She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, ...she would involve herself ...in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice , envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force...	
[America's] glory is not dominion , but liberty. ...She has a spear and a shield, but the motto upon her shield is, Freedom, Independence, Peace.	

Comprehension & Analysis Questions

1. What does John Quincy Adams identify as the Founding principles that America was built upon?
2. According to John Quincy Adams, how do those Founding principles continue to affect the policies that America carries out?
3. Why does Adams say that there is danger in fighting for liberty around the world as opposed to being an example for the world?