

Theodore Roosevelt: The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine (1904)

When he became president in 1901, Theodore Roosevelt brought with him to the White House a candid assumption of American superiority in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere. Within a few years, he grew concerned about the chronic instability of Latin American governments and economies. He especially worried that European powers might intervene in order to collect overdue debts. In 1904 a financial crisis in the Dominican Republic provoked him to formulate a new policy that came to be known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. His reasoning rested on the assumption that nations are not equal in stature. Those states unable to manage their affairs must submit to outside supervision by "first-class" powers.

From James D. Richardson, ed., Messages and Papers of the Presidents (Washington, DC, 1905)

... 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 force 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 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 cannot 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.... But 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. The cases in which we could interfere by force of arms as we interfered to put a stop to intolerable conditions in Cuba are necessarily very few.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did Roosevelt claim that the United States should interfere in the internal affairs of nations in Central and South America?
2. What factors contributed to Roosevelt's Corollary? Do you agree with his reasoning? Why?
3. In reflecting upon the expansion of American power around the world at the turn of the century, do you think it was motivated more by moral idealism or by power politics? Why?