

The Political Professionalism of James Monroe

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Analyses of effective chief executives rarely, if ever, include James Monroe, who is known mainly for the doctrine that bears his name. A close analysis of Monroe's presidential conduct, however, shows that he has been inappropriately overlooked. In his presidency, as well as in his pre-presidential political career, Monroe was an effective political professional who advanced his purposes consistently with the norms of his time, which dictated that the president not be perceived as usurping the powers of Congress.

James Monroe was a more effective chief executive than a number of his more illustrious predecessors, particularly John Adams and James Madison, both of whom are widely viewed as having made major contributions to the nation's founding period, but as having been weak chief executives. Monroe brought a pragmatic approach to politics and an unpretentious capacity for hard work to his presidency. In that, and in not being a college graduate, he resembled the twentieth-century president Harry S. Truman. Monroe also was like Truman in adhering to the prevailing notion of executive leadership. However, in Monroe's time, it was held that a president should at least give the impression of deferring to Congress (Ketcham 1987), and Truman served in a period that celebrated strong presidents who sought to place a personal stamp on public policy.

In this article, as in *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to George W. Bush* (Greenstein 2004), I review the personal development and political career of my protagonist and assess his strengths and weaknesses as chief executive in terms of his strengths and weaknesses in the realms of public communication, organizational capacity, political skill, policy vision, cognitive style, and emotional intelligence. These qualities prove to be as instructive for the analysis of an early president as they are for assessing modern chief executives.¹

1. This article is extracted from my forthcoming book, *Inventing the Job of the Chief Executive: The Conduct of the Presidency from Washington to Jackson*.

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Formative Years

Monroe was born in Westmoreland County, Virginia, to Spence and Elizabeth Monroe on April 28, 1758. Like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, Monroe came from a slaveholding plantation family. Unlike them, his parents were not in Virginia's upper stratum. However, he had a prosperous uncle who made it possible for him to attend a leading preparatory academy. Monroe entered the College of William and Mary in 1774, but he became absorbed in the American Revolution and left in February 1776 to serve as a lieutenant in a Virginia regiment.

In December of that year, Monroe took part in the Battle of Trenton, receiving a near-fatal wound while leading an advance party that silenced a battery of cannons threatening Washington's advance. He was promoted to captain in recognition of his heroism and saw further combat in the Battles of Brandywine, Germantown, and Monmouth. Monroe returned to Virginia to form a new regiment in 1778, but that proved not to be feasible. Making the best of his situation, he read law under Thomas Jefferson and became the older man's friend and disciple. Jefferson introduced Monroe to James Madison, with whom he formed a more tenuous bond.

Early Political Service

Monroe's long political career began with his election to the Virginia legislature in 1782. The following year, he was named to the Congress of the Confederation, the successor body to the Continental Congress. He served for three years, taking a particular interest in the development of the area between the Allegheny Mountains and the Mississippi River.

In 1790, the Virginia legislature appointed Monroe to the U.S. Senate. He became that body's leading Republican, joining with his House counterpart, James Madison, in opposition to Alexander Hamilton's financial program. In 1794, President Washington named Monroe minister to France. In assigning a prominent Republican to the post, Washington sought to address French concerns that the United States was siding against France in its war with Great Britain. Shortly after arriving in Paris, Monroe gave a speech to a French governmental body in which he spoke of the parallels between the American and French revolutions, declaring that the two nations were united in their respect for "the equal and unalienable rights of men" (Ammon 1990, 119). Washington came to believe that Monroe had been excessively outspoken in support of revolutionary France and recalled him. When he returned to the United States, Monroe published a lengthy treatise defending his actions in France (Monroe 1797).

Monroe continued to command the respect of the Republicans who controlled the Virginia legislature. In 1799, that body named him to the first of three one-year terms as governor. The Virginia governor of that period was appointed by the legislature rather than popularly elected and had few formal powers. Undeterred by the weakness of his office, Monroe instituted an annual message to the legislature, using it to

propose such policies as a program of road building and the introduction of free public education. He also won praise for acting rapidly to thwart an incipient slave rebellion.

An account of Monroe's leadership qualities was published in 1803 by William Wirt, a Virginia lawyer who later became attorney general in the Monroe administration. Wirt described Monroe as a "safe and an able counselor," adding that, although "nature has given him a mind neither rapid nor rich," it endowed him with "solid, strong and clear" judgment and "a habit of application which no difficulties can shake" (Wirt [1803] 1970, 174-75). Wirt's assertion anticipates that of historian Harry Ammon, who describes Monroe as "slow in thought" but marked by "qualities of judgment which earned him the lasting respect of far more talented men." Ammon notes, however, that Monroe was "hypersensitive to criticism" and inclined to "suspect slights where none were intended" (1990, 8, 18, 230).

Diplomat and Cabinet Member

In 1803, President Jefferson appointed Monroe as an envoy to France. His assignment was to join the American minister in an effort to acquire a site at the mouth of the Mississippi in the vast Louisiana Territory that France had acquired from Spain. Jefferson's aim was to provide the United States with a port at which river shipping could be transferred to oceangoing vessels. Monroe and the resident minister learned that Napoleon was prepared to sell the entire Louisiana Territory. Disregarding their limited mandate, they negotiated a treaty in which the United States made the larger acquisition, correctly assuming that Jefferson would go along with their action.

While in France, Monroe received word that Jefferson had appointed him minister to Great Britain, a position he held for four years. During that time, he and the diplomat William Pinckney were charged with negotiating a treaty providing for Britain to honor American maritime rights. The result was the Monroe-Pinckney Treaty, which Jefferson chose not to submit to the Senate for ratification because of its silence on the British practice of boarding American ships in an effort to recover deserters from the Royal Navy. Monroe took the failure to submit the treaty for ratification as a rebuff, for which he blamed Secretary of State Madison. He became estranged from Madison for several years, but Jefferson eventually reconciled his two friends.

Monroe's next public service was in the Madison administration. In 1811, Madison named him to replace Robert Smith as secretary of state. In the aftermath of the British assault on Washington, DC in 1814, Madison placed him in charge of the War Department but did not replace him as secretary of state. After the war, Monroe resigned his War Department position but remained secretary of state until the end of the Madison presidency. In 1816, Monroe was chosen as the Republican presidential candidate. Because the Federalists had been discredited as a result of their opposition to the War of 1812, he faced no serious opposition and won the presidency with 84% of the electoral vote.

A Purposeful President

By the time Monroe entered the White House, he had been a soldier, legislator, governor, diplomat, and cabinet secretary and had carried out his duties with energy and purpose. He brought the same qualities to bear on his conduct of the presidency. Historians now view Monroe's White House years as an interlude between the first American party system, in which Federalists competed with Republicans, and the second party system, in which Democrats vied with Whigs (McCormick 1966, 19-31, 329-56). Monroe, however, thought of it as the beginning of an era in which the United States would be free of the "curse" of political parties. In his inaugural address, Monroe described the American people as "one great family with a common interest" and vowed to promote national "harmony in accord with the principles of our republican government."² He also discussed military preparedness, urging that the nation's coastal and inland frontiers be fortified, a theme that needed little elaboration in a city that bore the scars of its invasion by the British in the War of 1812.

Monroe appointed what historians have judged to be an exceptionally strong cabinet, seeking geographic balance as well as competence in his choices. His selection for secretary of state was John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, the nation's most able and experienced diplomat. He appointed William H. Crawford of Georgia as secretary of the treasury and Benjamin Crowninshield of Massachusetts as secretary of the navy, keeping them in positions they had filled responsibly in the Madison administration. Monroe also named William Wirt of Virginia as his attorney general. He sought an appointee from what was then the West to head the War Department. He first attempted to persuade Speaker of the House Henry Clay of Kentucky to take the post, but Clay was unwilling to accept a lesser position than secretary of state. After another unsuccessful attempt to persuade a Westerner to take the position, Monroe filled it with Congressman John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, who proved to be an able and innovative secretary of war.

There was little for Monroe to do immediately after his inauguration. The newly elected Congress was not scheduled to meet until December, and he could not deliberate productively with the cabinet because Secretary of State Adams had yet to return from Great Britain, where he was the American minister. Making the most of what otherwise would have been an unproductive interval, Monroe devoted the early months of his presidency to conducting the first of his three well-received tours of the nation, spending three months visiting the Northern and border states.

Monroe's plan had been to conduct a low-profile inspection of the nation's coastal and inland fortifications, following up the call in his inaugural address for improved military preparedness. But within days, it became evident that it was not practical for a chief executive to tour the nation in such an inconspicuous manner. Monroe left the capital in June 1819 for his first scheduled stop, which was Baltimore. As he approached the city, cheering citizens lined his route. He was escorted to the mayor, who welcomed

2. All quotations from presidential documents are taken from the Web site of the American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>), an invaluable online resource that contains the messages and papers of the presidents.

him with an oration, to which Monroe replied. During his two days in Baltimore, Monroe was lavishly entertained and otherwise honored.

The tone had been set for the remainder of the tour. Although Monroe continued to inspect military sites, the bulk of his time was spent in what the editors of *The Papers of James Monroe* describe as “public business of another sort—seeing and being seen by the people of the United States. [He] was escorted from town to town by cauldades of militia and private citizens, he was escorted into towns by parades, he attended dinners, concerts, and receptions, he listened to speeches and he made speeches” (Preston and DeLong 2002, xix). Recognizing the political utility of his tour, Monroe used his time in the Federalist stronghold of New England to establish friendly relations with former partisan adversaries. In the words of a Boston newspaper, the new president appeared to be ushering in an “era of good feelings” (Ammon 1990, 366-79).

Monroe spent the month following his return restoring his energies at his Virginia plantation. He devoted time, however, to correspondence on policy matters with members of his cabinet, particularly John Quincy Adams, who had recently arrived in Washington. Monroe returned to the capital in October and convened the cabinet for a detailed review of the draft of his first message to Congress. That communication, which set the pattern for Monroe’s later messages to Congress, began with a detailed review of the nation’s foreign and domestic circumstances and went on to recommend several congressional actions. Monroe’s most noteworthy proposals were for the repeal of the nation’s internal taxes and the initiation of a constitutional amendment that would authorize the federal government to construct roads and canals.

Monroe’s messages to Congress were the public side of his legislative relations. He also regularly corresponded privately with individual legislators and met with lawmakers in the White House, usually inviting them to stay on for a mid-afternoon dinner. Congress acted favorably on Monroe’s proposal to eliminate taxes, but it ignored his call for a constitutional amendment, setting itself up for his veto of a turnpike measure in his second term.

Expanding and Preserving the Nation

Two of the most important developments during the Monroe presidency involved a major expansion of the nation’s boundaries and a constitutional crisis that was resolved by a historic compromise. The first of these episodes began in 1818, when the secretary of war ordered General Andrew Jackson to pacify Seminole Indians who were making raids into Georgia from the Spanish colony of Florida. Rather than positioning his forces in Georgia, Jackson led them well into Florida, where they razed Seminole villages, executed two British subjects for supplying the Indians, and deposed the Spanish governor. There were widespread demands for Jackson to be disciplined for exceeding his authority. Monroe and Adams chose instead to take advantage of Jackson’s demonstration of Spain’s weakness and to enter into negotiations that led to the ceding of Florida to the United States by Spain and the signing of the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819, in which

Spain acknowledged that the northwestern boundary of the United States extended to the Pacific Ocean. In exchange, the United States agreed to settle \$5 million in claims against Spain by Americans.

The second development was triggered by the petition for statehood of the Missouri Territory in 1819. Because of the presence of slavery in Missouri, it seemed certain to enter the Union as a slave state. That outcome was abhorrent to many Northerners because it would have led to a proslavery majority in the Senate. A Northern-sponsored amendment was introduced in Congress that would have had the effect of prohibiting slavery in Missouri. After a stormy controversy in which threats were made to dissolve the Union, Missouri was granted statehood without restrictions on slavery, but the balance of power in the Senate was preserved by admitting Maine as a free state.

Monroe left the public impression that he was a bystander to the Missouri Compromise. However, he played an unpublicized part in bringing it about. Early in the episode, Monroe encouraged a prominent Virginia political figure to publish a series of articles in the administration-sponsored newspaper, the *National Intelligencer*, which insisted that it was unconstitutional to make the admission of a new state to the Union contingent on a precondition such as the abolition of slavery. Later in the episode, Monroe worked with individual congressmen to link the admission of Missouri to that of Maine. It is unclear whether Monroe's efforts were decisive in the resulting compromise, but there is abundant evidence that he played an important part in the episode (Ammon 1990, 449-61; Cunningham 1996, 87-104; Forbes 2006, 2:391; 2007, 173-86).

The good feelings of Monroe's first term reached their high point in the election of 1820, when he was reelected with all but one electoral vote. His second term was less eventful than his first, but it witnessed a pair of important foreign policy developments. In 1822, Monroe formally recognized the newly independent republics of Latin America, a move he had resisted until negotiations with Spain reached a favorable conclusion. He also took the action for which he is best remembered by declaring the Western Hemisphere off limits to new colonization, enunciating what has come to be known as the Monroe Doctrine.

Leadership Qualities

Public Communication. Monroe's public communications were ponderous and uninspiring, but he won paradoxical praise for their unpretentious manner. One of his ways of reaching the public was to mail copies of his annual messages to Congress to his friends and political allies throughout the country. Another was his extensive tours of the nation, which were well covered in the press. Monroe was the first president since Washington to make such tours. He visited well over 100 communities, traveling from Maine to Georgia and well into the West. Monroe was seen by more Americans than any previous president, and his travels were reported on in detail in the local and national press. Because he replied to the welcoming speeches with which he was greeted in each community, Monroe stood out among the early presidents in being widely heard.

The *National Intelligencer* served as a quasi-official administration newspaper during Monroe's presidency, as it had in the Jefferson and Madison presidencies. The best-documented instance of its use by the Monroe administration occurred in the aftermath of Andrew Jackson's 1818 military incursion into Florida. On that occasion, the cabinet debated for a full week over a draft article that asserted the administration had decided to withdraw American forces from Florida but had insisted that Spain maintain enough troops there to prevent future Indian raids on Georgia. Once the cabinet agreed on its wording, the article was published with no indication of its authorship (Cunningham 1996, 62-63).

Organizational Capacity. As we have seen, Monroe appointed an exceptionally strong cabinet, whose members worked well under him. He convened the cabinet regularly for policy debates, often for long meetings. He also avoided convening it when he knew that it was unlikely to reach agreement. Monroe's cabinet was notable for its low turnover. Four of its five members served for his full two terms. The scholar who has most closely examined the inner workings of Monroe's presidency describes him as a "hands on" chief executive "who held tightly to the final executive authority" (Cunningham 1996, 118).

Political Skill. As early in his political career as his Virginia governorship, Monroe was noteworthy for his political skill, making a weak office stronger by taking the lead in proposing policies to the legislature, a practice he continued into his presidency. Once he was president, Monroe used his tours of the nation to consolidate his political support. He also worked effectively with Secretary of State Adams and played a behind-the-scenes part in the Missouri Compromise. Monroe was the first chief executive who might be referred to as a "political professional," in the sense that public service was the lifelong source of his livelihood. But unlike later professional politicians, Monroe did not enrich himself from holding office. Indeed, he paid the expenses of his tours of the nation himself and was deeply in debt by the end of his presidency.

Policy Vision. Monroe's policy views were broadly republican. Thus, one of his gubernatorial messages to the legislature proposed that Virginia institute a system of free public education. He also was a strong nationalist with an interest in expanding the nation. But, as Noble Cunningham points out, Monroe was "neither an ideologue nor a leader with a grand vision." Instead, he was "a pragmatic politician" who focused on achieving "specific, attainable objectives" (1996, 4, 118).

Cognitive Style. William Wirt's characterization of Monroe's judgment as "solid, strong and clear" was echoed by many of his associates. The cognitive style that led him to receive such accolades is illuminated in the following assertion by his former secretary of war, John C. Calhoun, on the occasion of Monroe's death:

He had a wonderful intellectual patience and could above all men that I ever knew, when called upon to decide on an important point, hold the subject immovably fixed under his

attention until he had mastered it in all of his relations. . . . I have known many more rapid in reaching a conclusion, but few with a certainty so unerring. (quoted in Ammon 1990, 369)

Emotional Intelligence. Although Monroe was inclined to take offense at perceived slights, he was able to put aside his resentments. Thus, he was estranged from James Madison for several years but went on to serve in Madison's cabinet. Monroe also once remarked that he had been wounded by William Wirt's description of his mind as "neither rapid nor rich," but that did not prevent him from making Wirt a member of his administration. Monroe's capacity to rise above his resentments is another respect in which he resembled Truman, who let off steam by composing intemperate memoranda (including one threatening the Soviet Union and China with nuclear war) but consigned such outpourings to his files and carried out his responsibilities in a measured, responsible manner (Donovan 1982, 370-71).

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