

Interview Transcript- President: James Monroe

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Greetings! I am James Monroe, the 5th President of the United States. I'm here to discuss my presidency, policies, and the important decisions I made during my time in office (1817-1825). I can share insights about significant events like the Monroe Doctrine, the Missouri Compromise, and my relationships with both my predecessors and successors.

I'll be happy to explain my reasoning behind various policies and decisions, drawing from my actual speeches and documents. Feel free to ask me about any aspect of my presidency or how I demonstrated leadership characteristics like moral authority, economic management, international relations, crisis management, public persuasion, vision, and pursuit of equal justice.

What would you like to know about my time as President?

[Why did you issue the Monroe Doctrine without the military power to enforce it?](#)

Adjusts cravat thoughtfully

Ah, an excellent question about the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. While it's true we didn't have a mighty military force at the time, I issued this doctrine for several strategic reasons:

1. British Support

- Though we didn't openly acknowledge it, we had Britain's unofficial backing
- The British Navy was the world's strongest maritime force
- Britain shared our interest in keeping other European powers out of the Americas, as they wanted to maintain their own trading relationships

1. Diplomatic Strategy

- The doctrine was primarily a diplomatic declaration, not a military threat
- It established clear principles of American foreign policy
- It served as a warning to European powers without requiring immediate military action

1. Timing

- European powers were weakened after the Napoleonic Wars
- Spain was losing its grip on its colonies
- The moment was right to assert American leadership in the hemisphere

1. Long-term Vision

- I believed America would grow stronger over time
- The doctrine would establish principles that future presidents could build upon

- It was about setting a precedent for future American foreign policy

Remember, as I stated in my annual message to Congress, our goal was to show that "the American continents... are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers." Sometimes, a strong diplomatic stance can be as effective as military might.

Would you like to know more about how this doctrine shaped our relationships with European powers or Latin American nations?

Would you consider this to be the best thing you did in office, or is there something else?

Straightens in chair with careful consideration

While the Monroe Doctrine is perhaps my most remembered achievement, I would say the Missouri Compromise of 1820 was equally, if not more, significant during my presidency. Let me explain why:

1. The Missouri Compromise

- Prevented an immediate civil crisis over slavery
- Maintained balance between free and slave states
- Drew a clear line at latitude 36°30' North to define future free and slave territories
- Demonstrated my ability to manage a severe domestic crisis
- Required delicate negotiations between Northern and Southern interests

1. The Era of Good Feelings

- My presidency brought unprecedented national unity
- Won re-election almost unanimously (231 electoral votes to 1)
- Reduced partisan tensions that had divided the nation
- Promoted American nationalism after the War of 1812

1. Territorial Expansion

- The Adams-Onís Treaty with Spain secured Florida
- Extended our border to the Pacific Ocean
- Gained Spain's abandonment of claims to the Oregon Territory
- Accomplished through negotiation rather than warfare

The Monroe Doctrine was significant, but these other achievements were crucial for domestic stability and territorial growth. The Missouri Compromise, in particular, bought precious time for our young nation, though I regret it didn't provide a permanent solution to the slavery question.

What are your thoughts on which of these achievements had the most lasting impact on our nation?

So which one was the best thing you did in office?

Speaks with firm conviction

After careful reflection, I would say the Missouri Compromise was my most significant achievement in office. Here's why:

At that moment in 1820, our nation was on the brink of potentially splitting apart over the slavery issue. The Missouri Compromise, while not a perfect solution, literally held the Union together. Without it, we might have faced a civil war four decades earlier than we did.

Think of it like a doctor treating a critical patient - the Missouri Compromise was emergency medicine for a nation in crisis. While the Monroe Doctrine shaped our foreign policy and the Adams-Onís Treaty expanded our territory, the Missouri Compromise directly prevented an immediate national catastrophe.

As president, my highest duty was preserving the Union. The Compromise achieved that goal, even if temporarily. It showed that through careful negotiation and compromise, even the most divisive issues could be managed. This success also contributed to what historians call the "Era of Good Feelings" during my presidency.

Does this help explain why I consider the Missouri Compromise my most significant achievement?

You mentioned that you regretted not finding a permanent solution to slavery, so why did you oppose slavery while owning slaves?

Shifts uncomfortably in chair

You raise a very challenging and legitimate question about the contradiction in my position. Indeed, this reflects one of the greatest moral failures of my generation of leaders.

Like many of my fellow Virginians, including Jefferson and Madison, I was caught in a profound moral contradiction:

- I spoke about liberty and human rights
- I recognized slavery as morally wrong
- Yet I continued to own slaves and profit from their labor
- I advocated for gradual emancipation but never freed my own slaves

This inconsistency stemmed from several factors:

- Economic dependence on slave labor
- Social and cultural norms of Virginia society
- Fear of the economic and social consequences of immediate abolition

- Personal financial interests overriding moral principles

I supported the American Colonization Society and believed in gradually ending slavery through colonization of freed slaves in Africa (which led to the creation of Liberia). However, I acknowledge this was an inadequate response to a fundamental moral wrong.

Looking back, I must admit this represents a significant failure in moral leadership. Like many of my contemporaries, I failed to live up to the ideals of human equality that we proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence.

This is a sobering reminder that even presidents can fail to rise above the moral shortcomings of their time. Would you like to discuss how this contradiction affected my policies as president?

[Speaking of the Declaration of Independence, why is it that you oppose ratifying the constitution; the other founding document?](#)

Straightens posture with a concerned expression

I must respectfully correct your statement. I did not oppose ratifying the Constitution. You might be confusing me with some other Anti-Federalists of the time.

Let me clarify my position:

- I initially had concerns about the Constitution, specifically about the lack of a Bill of Rights
- However, I ultimately supported ratification
- I worked alongside James Madison in Virginia's ratification convention
- I helped write several of the Federalist Papers supporting ratification

My position was actually quite nuanced:

1. I wanted stronger protections for individual rights
2. I supported adding the Bill of Rights
3. I believed in a strong federal government, but with proper checks and balances
4. I saw the Constitution as essential for national unity

In fact, my presidency later demonstrated strong support for constitutional principles through:

- Respect for separation of powers
- Support for federal authority in national development
- Protection of states' rights within the federal framework
- Upholding constitutional procedures

Would you like to know more about how my views on the Constitution influenced my presidential policies?

Speaking of your policies, what sort of policies did you support while as a senator and as president?

Adjusts chair and speaks with clarity

As both Senator and President, I supported policies focused on national unity and development. Let me break down my key policy positions:

As Senator:

- Supported the Louisiana Purchase
- Advocated for stronger national defense
- Pushed for protection of American maritime rights
- Voted for infrastructure development

As President:

1. Economic Policies

- Supported the Protective Tariff of 1816
- Promoted internal improvements (roads, canals)
- Backed the Second Bank of the United States
- Worked to manage the Panic of 1819

1. Foreign Policy

- Established the Monroe Doctrine
- Negotiated the Adams-Onís Treaty
- Reduced military spending through the Military Establishment Act
- Focused on diplomatic solutions over military action

1. Domestic Policy

- Supported the Missouri Compromise
- Advocated for national infrastructure
- Promoted American industry
- Worked to unite different regions of the country

1. Native American Policy

- Continued Indian removal policies
- Authorized military actions against Seminole tribes
- Negotiated treaties for land acquisition

My policies generally aimed to:

- Strengthen national unity
- Promote economic growth

- Expand American territory
- Maintain peace with European powers
- Develop American infrastructure

Would you like me to elaborate on any of these specific policies?

What drew you to your foreign policies?

Leans forward thoughtfully

My foreign policy approach was shaped by my extensive diplomatic experience and our nation's position after the War of 1812. Let me explain what drove my decisions:

1. Personal Experience

- Served as Minister to France
- Served as Minister to Britain
- Served as Secretary of State under Madison
- These roles showed me the importance of diplomatic strength

1. Post-War Reality

- America was militarily weak after the War of 1812
- European powers were exhausted from Napoleonic Wars
- Perfect timing for diplomatic solutions
- Opportunity to assert American influence

1. Key Motivations

- Desire to secure American borders
- Protection of newly independent Latin American nations
- Preventing further European colonization
- Expanding U.S. territory through negotiation

1. Strategic Thinking

- Used Britain's naval power to our advantage
- Focused on peaceful expansion (Adams-Onís Treaty)
- Reduced military spending to focus on commerce
- Established clear diplomatic boundaries with Europe

My foreign policy can be summed up in this principle: "America should deal with foreign nations with a firm but peaceful approach, maintaining our rights and interests while avoiding unnecessary conflicts."

Would you like to explore how any of these policies specifically affected America's international relationships?

You mentioned many offices that you served in; why did you keep leaving them? Specifically as governor of Virginia, which you left after less than three months.

Adjusts collar, looking slightly uncomfortable

Ah, yes. Let me address this directly. I resigned as Governor of Virginia in 1802 after only three months for a very specific reason - President Jefferson appointed me as Minister to France for an extraordinary diplomatic mission. This wasn't about abandoning responsibilities, but rather accepting a crucial national duty.

Let me explain my pattern of service:

1. The French Mission was urgent because:

- We needed to negotiate the Louisiana Purchase
- Relations with France were at a critical point
- Jefferson specifically requested my diplomatic experience
- The opportunity to double our nation's territory was at stake

1. My other position changes were strategic:

- Moved from Senator to Minister to Britain and France for diplomatic purposes
- Shifted from Minister to Secretary of State to help manage the War of 1812
- Went from Secretary of State to President as a natural progression

1. Each move was about serving where I could be most effective:

- From state to national level
- From legislative to diplomatic roles
- From cabinet position to presidency

I never left positions out of disinterest or irresponsibility. Each transition was about answering a call to serve in a more crucial capacity for our young nation.

Would you like to know more about what I accomplished in any of these specific roles?

Moving from foreign policy to domestic; what was your role in the Revolutionary War?

Straightens up with pride

I was quite young when the Revolution began - just 17 in 1775 - but I played an active role throughout the war. Let me share my military service:

1. Early Service

- Joined the 3rd Virginia Regiment
- Fought at the Battle of Trenton
- Was wounded in the battle - took a musket ball to my shoulder

- Lieutenant Colonel James Monroe was my rank
- 1. Notable Moments
 - Crossed the Delaware with Washington
 - Was in the famous painting crossing the Delaware
 - Served as an aide to General William Alexander (Lord Stirling)
 - Nearly died from my wound at Trenton
 - 1. Impact on My Leadership
 - Gained firsthand military experience
 - Understood the importance of military preparedness
 - Developed strong respect for civilian control of military
 - Built relationships with future leaders
 - 1. After the War
 - Used military experience to inform decisions as President
 - Understood the human cost of war
 - Preferred diplomatic solutions when possible
 - Maintained strong support for veterans

This experience shaped my later policies, especially my belief in maintaining military readiness while preferring diplomatic solutions. Would you like to know more about how my military service influenced my presidential decisions?

[On the topic of turbulent times, how did you help solve the Panic of 1819?](#)

Furrows brow with concern

The Panic of 1819 was one of the most challenging crises during my presidency. To be completely honest, my administration's response was not as effective as it could have been.

Here's what happened:

- 1. Causes of the Panic
 - Second Bank of the United States tightened credit
 - Land speculation had created a bubble
 - International markets declined
 - Post-war economic problems surfaced
 - 1. My Administration's Response
 - Supported the Bank's strict policies initially
 - Tried to maintain fiscal discipline
 - Limited federal intervention (following traditional approach)
 - Focused on long-term stability over short-term relief

1. What Worked and What Didn't

Worked:

- Maintained stable currency
- Preserved the Bank's independence
- Kept federal debt manageable

Didn't Work:

- Failed to provide immediate relief to citizens
- Didn't adequately address unemployment
- Could have done more to help farmers and debtors

1. Lessons Learned

- Need for better financial regulations
- Importance of balanced economic growth
- Recognition that federal intervention might sometimes be necessary

Looking back, I must acknowledge that my administration could have done more to provide relief to struggling Americans during this crisis. This experience influenced future presidents' approaches to economic crises.

Would you like to explore how this crisis affected specific regions or groups of Americans?

Lastly, what are some criticisms of you as a person and a leader?

Adjusts posture and speaks solemnly

Let me address the major criticisms honestly:

1. Personal Contradictions

- Owned slaves while claiming to oppose slavery
- Spoke of equality while supporting policies that denied it
- Lived luxuriously while in office, leading to personal debt
- Had to sell my property to pay debts after presidency

1. Leadership Weaknesses

- Too passive during the Panic of 1819
- Failed to address slavery issue decisively
- Sometimes indecisive on major issues
- Relied heavily on advisors for decision-making

1. Policy Criticisms

- Missouri Compromise was only a temporary solution
- Native American policies were harsh and unjust
- Monroe Doctrine was largely unenforceable at the time

- Economic policies didn't prevent or effectively address the Panic of 1819

1. Administrative Issues

- Appointed some incompetent friends to government positions
- Spent too much on White House furnishings
- Sometimes avoided confronting difficult issues
- Could be too concerned with consensus rather than taking strong stands

1. Legacy Problems

- Left office in personal financial trouble
- Failed to set clear direction on slavery issue
- Some policies contributed to later sectional conflicts
- Native American removal policies had devastating consequences

Would you like me to elaborate on any of these criticisms or discuss how they affected my presidency?