



James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity

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A biography of James Monroe who became the fifth president of the United States in 1816. Ammon recreates his remarkable career, through his service in the revolutionary army, the Confederation Congress, to his exertions in James Madison's cabinet and his subsequent presidency.

James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity Details

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From Reader Review James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity for online ebook

Guera25 says

The scholarship is thorough, but it's dry, dry reading.

Christian Dibblee says

It's hard not to marvel at Monroe's professional accomplishments; Revolutionary officer, Confederation Congress, Governor of Virginia (twice), Minister to France and general diplomat extraordinaire, Senator, Cabinet Secretary, and President (in no specific order). One would think he would be a fascinating historical character, the last of the Founding Father generation to be President.

Unfortunately, Ammon's biography certainly provides the detail for those who are interested, but it's not an especially exciting book. In fact, several segments detail very complex issues that are often hard to follow (such as the various letters published during the 1828 election by Jackson and Calhoun, or the continuing negotiations with Spain). I have no doubt a more readable biography could be written that does justice to Monroe's life.

That said, Monroe might also have been a more boring guy than his predecessors. Ammon portrays him as a well-liked person who rose to prominence through a mix of "street smarts" and affability, not necessarily genius (as was the case for Madison). We are severely handicapped too in that his letters to his wife were all burned, meaning his more intimate thoughts aren't on the record. His professional letters or letters to friends also do not show much (unlike in the case of Jefferson and Adams). Point being: Ammon didn't have much to work with, though we know for sure Monroe was especially sensitive to criticism.

The strongest part of the book dealing only with Monroe is probably his time as a diplomat, both during the Washington Administration and beyond. It fascinated me to learn Monroe had pressed his superiors to abandon their impressment demands as early as 1802, a position that if it had been adopted might have spared the country from the ill-advised War of 1812. I also enjoyed Ammon's recounting of Monroe's struggles to interact with Revolutionary France while also representing the opinions of a Federalist Administration.

This book also shatters the "Era of Good Feelings" myth in that while there might not have been a bifurcated party system from 1814-1828, there was plenty of rancor to go around. Many Republicans took shots at the President's agenda, using those policies as a way to distinguish themselves from other Republicans (the jockeying to be Monroe's successor was fierce to say the least). It's amazing that the Missouri debate occurred during this time, and yet somehow history remembers the period as one marked by kindness in the political realm. In addition, Monroe looks fairly impotent in dealing with Congress, despite Ammon's argument to the contrary. At points, his thoughts on issues like internal improvements and national defense were blatantly ignored by the Congress.

Furthermore, Ammon's description of Monroe's presidency was not especially inspiring. For one he avoids chronological retelling, preferring to separate it out by theme. I hate this method in almost all cases, and this is no exception. He also doesn't give the reader much on the significance of the Monroe Doctrine, which comes across as significant only as long as the British Navy was unwilling to meddle in the Americas. Considering most people only know Monroe's name in connection with the Doctrine, it seems Ammon could

have done a better job with it.

And that ties into my biggest critique: this biography tells all about Monroe and details his political doings, but Ammon almost never gives his opinions about Monroe's legacy and how it should be viewed by us today. For an author who clearly admires his subject, this omission surprised me, and makes me wonder whether a different biography might be best (note: I researched Unger's book on Monroe and he says Monroe was the big dog of the time and that Jefferson and Madison were merely "caretaker Presidents." I'm unwilling to agree with that notion, but his attempts are more than Ammon's efforts).

If you're like me and you want to know more about the Presidents, this book is perfectly sufficient and represents a lot of the 1970s-era scholarship that gives facts and avoids any sweeping generalizations. But it does not place Monroe in any themes or contexts, sweeping or otherwise. The writing is excellent though tedious, and many chapters are boring, but the information is all there if you want to spend the time bathing in it.

Stephan Burton says

I liked that this book is very thorough. This book has a detailed description of the political life and accomplishments of James Monroe. His major successes were in foreign policy, including negotiation of the Louisiana Purchase. The reading can be dry at times (some of the foreign policy matters are arguably hard to make interesting), but overall the work is highly informative. You do not get much of a picture of James Monroe as a human as there is little mention of family and personal matters, though Ammon makes this disclaimer.

Jim says

James Monroe is one of our more overlooked Founding Fathers; in fact, he is often not considered one of the Founding Fathers at all, or at least is seen as a more peripheral one. It is rather astonishing, when one considers that he fought in the Revolution under Washington, rising to the rank of Colonel, represented his constituents in the Virginia Assembly, became the Washington Administration's Minister to France, was elected Governor of Virginia, helped negotiate the Louisiana Purchase, became Minister to Britain under Jefferson, Secretary of State and Secretary of War (for a time, simultaneously) in the Madison Administration, and finally became the fifth President of the US, winning re-election by almost unanimous vote in the electoral college, and instituted what became known as the Monroe Doctrine.

Why, then, does Monroe get short shrift? Harry Ammon's biography sheds some light on this, and it is perhaps the fault of his subject that Ammon's book does not always captivate the reader. In short, Monroe was a politician, though an uncommonly well-liked and principled one, and not much of a thinker, innovator or theoretician. He was, by contemporary accounts, extremely nice, scrupulous and honest. Cue the yawns from the drama seekers.

In truth, Monroe's era was a highly dramatic and consequential one, and he played a role in many significant conflicts, both international and internecine, throughout his (almost entirely) political career. He left behind very little of color, though- very little in the way of personal notes, letters or effects that would indicate a tendency to impose a forceful personality to shape events. Rather, he seems to have been a good soldier in the nascent Republican Party, and a loyal Jeffersonian both overseas and back at home. The controversies

that he became embroiled in were usually misunderstandings, and it is hard to conclude that many of his direct actions had lasting consequences for the Republic.

His time as Minister to France, for instance, occurred just after Robespierre's Reign of Terror was put to an end, along with the Jacobin's life. France was entering a particularly strange lull, in which the early promise of the Republic had been subverted, and the Committee for Public Safety still exercised most power in the government. Monroe was a Francophile, yet found that his efforts to encourage the French to treat America with greater respect, which might have had the benefit of rallying America to the side of her old ally, largely fell on deaf ears as continued conflict with Britain took precedence. Monroe managed to get sideways with the Washington Administration, mainly through the intransigence of Sec. of State Timothy Pickering, but suffered no real political damage. As a protege of Jefferson's, he was able to vindicate his actions and become governor of Virginia with relative ease. He then came into conflict again with political friends and foes, including, briefly, Jefferson and Madison, the latter of whom he did not contact for over two years at one point. But always, things cleared up, rifts were healed, and he sailed forward- the setbacks in his life were rare, short and always led to something greater, it seemed.

And yet, he never seemed to be the Prime Mover. Sent as a special envoy to help negotiate for the purchase of New Orleans, the offer to sell all of Louisiana was made to the then-Minister, Robert Livingston, just before Monroe's arrival in Paris. Working diligently to negotiate a treaty with Britain that (almost certainly) would have prevented the War of 1812, a stupid and pointless war from the perspective of both sides, he failed to secure the approval of Jefferson and Madison due o the lack of an accommodation over impressment, which was not (for most Americans) a hugely significant issue. As Secretary of State, and then of War, for Madison during the War of 1812, he again failed to prevent the war, then competently managed his departments but failed to convince Madison to take his (sound) advice over that of other, less qualified cabinet members. Even as President, with his own "Team of Rivals" serving beneath him (John Quincy Adams, John Calhoun, William Crawford in the Cabinet and Andrew Jackson as his general on the Florida frontier), he seemed buffeted by the rivalries and was unable to tap his own direct line of influence in Congress. The "Era of Good Feelings" identified with him due to the implosion of the Federalist Party after 1815 was largely a mirage, masking the new factionalism that was ready to tear the Republican Party in two. The acquisition of Florida was precipitated by Jackson's rash actions, and the Missouri Compromise was largely a Congressional exercise.

To be sure, Monroe was a competent and honest administrator, who was very progressive for his era (especially as it related to Indians), and served in all of his roles with distinction, if not brilliance. The Monroe Doctrine justly bears his name, as he laid the groundwork for Adam's expression of the principle that European powers ought not to meddle in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere. It is refreshing to think that a President who wished for the Constitutional authority to enact internal improvements, but sincerely did not believe he had that authority, would ask Congress to amend the Constitution for that purpose, rather than do what he wisd and wait for the Supreme Court to arbitrate. Monroe took his powers, and the limitations upon those powers, quite seriously, and there is a humility in that which is quite admirable.

Ultimately, the trouble with this book is that too little time was spent giving the background or broader context for the major geopolitical events that determined the course of Monroe's life, and too little of Monroe's life was spent directly impacting these events. So the detailed, blow-by-blow account of the difference of opinion he had with Jefferson over the British treaty effort, fo example, are hard to place into context without a greater understanding of why Jefferson and Madison were so intransigent over impressment. Many times, the events that affected him, or motivations of those who opposed him, were too quickly glossed over, leaving a great deal of detail about Monroe's specific actions and impressions, but not much broader knowledge of the meaning and impact of the life he led. It seems, perhaps, an odd criticism of a biographer that he focused to much on his subject. But Monroe's life serves, in many ways, to show how competence, honesty and loyalty in politics can lead one to great heights- but perhaps also demonstrates how a force of will from a strong personality, or lack thereof, can shape events, or be shaped by them.

Washington, Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson, Madison and Jackson were all shapers, in one way or another, for good or ill. Monroe was more or less shaped by the world and personalities around him, and though it was, in the end, a fine shape, it mainly reflects the mold that created it. We would have done better, perhaps, to examine the mold more closely.

Andrew Canfield says

This was a spectacular biography of a major early American public servant. The amount of research Ammon put into this undertaking was gargantuan, and it shows in an incredibly detailed, rich account of the fifth president's accomplishments in and out of office.

When I started this 570 plus page book, my knowledge of Monroe was quite limited. The Monroe Doctrine was familiar, as was his role in the so-called Era of Good Feelings, but my understanding was quite two-dimensional prior to cracking open *The Quest for National Identity*. Once it was finished, my ignorance on it had gone a long way to being quelled.

The book walks readers through Monroe's service in the Revolutionary War (he left college to fight and was injured in the Battle of Trenton) and goes into a deep account of his diplomatic service. Monroe's role as a diplomat in France and his efforts to help Jefferson "found" the party of republican resistance to Federalist policies were all spelled out in a detailed manner by Ammon.

He discusses both of Monroe's terms as president, particularly the Cabinet infighting between the men scrambling to replace him in the 1824 presidential election (Calhoun and John Quincy Adams). Ammon also explains the policy toward South America which led to the Monroe Doctrine of European interference in America's hemisphere in addition to puncturing the myth of Monroe's time in office being a veritable Era of Good Feelings (he actually refers to it as oftentimes being an Era of Bad Feelings).

A slew of errors—largely revolving around comma and punctuation usage (largely the editor's fault and not Ammon's) was the only aspect holding it back from receiving five stars. A stellar read for lovers of American history. Some might fault the biography for not having the novel-like quality of a McCullough or Chernow work, but I still found it a strong accounting of Monroe's time on the public scene.

-Andrew Canfield Shreveport, La.

Mark says

Though published over forty years ago, it is easy to see at a glance why Ammon's biography of James Monroe has never been bettered. This is an exhaustive examination of the political life of our fifth president - and an exhausting one. Ammon goes through Monroe's life with a thoroughness that makes this a book an excellent source of information about Monroe, but at the price of making it an excruciatingly dull read at times. If you want to know *everything* there is to know about Monroe's political career or about diplomacy in the Federalist Era, then this is your book; otherwise, I would recommend either Noble Cunningham's *The Presidency of James Monroe* or Gary Hart's short *James Monroe* in the "American Presidents" series.

Brian Schwartz says

Harry Ammon tackles a tough subject in his biography of James Monroe because Monroe left scant information about his life for historians to examine. Unlike the Adams, who were compulsive savers of correspondence and records, Monroe destroyed them routinely.

We don't really get to know James Monroe, the man. Nor do we get to know much about his wife, Elizabeth.

Ammon is superb in his policy and political analysis. This is a good book for presidential biography wonks. Ammon comes up short in animating Monroe the man. He had only the commentaries of Monroe's contemporaries -- who all saw Monroe through their own biases -- to use. So Ammon can be forgiven his lack of "character development" within his biography.

Jeff says

A very solid, informative read. It tended to be somewhat on the flattering side, but it seemed relatively objective. I learned a great deal about this period and it showed very nicely how Monroe fit into the succession of Presidents, and particularly his relationships with Jefferson and Madison.

I'd recommend it.

Jeremy Perron says

James Monroe, although not our most exciting president, was certainly popular being the last president to run unopposed in the election of 1820. I think there is some debate over whether we can call James Monroe a Founding Father. Although he is certainly of the founding generation, he played only a minor role in founding of the country. He was a company officer in the Army of George Washington, fighting in the famous Battle of Trenton in which Washington and his men crossed the Delaware to surprise the Hessians after Christmas. He was only president to be on the Anti-Federalist side during the ratification debates. Yet, he is also the president responsible for his famous Monroe Doctrine, and the Era of Good Feelings.

Although this book was written in 1971, my copy (paperback) was not produced until 1991. What is very amusing about this, is in the new preface Harry Ammon states in the first paragraph that there is no difference between the two editions, because in the two decades between them no new information has come out about the life of James Monroe. Unlike Jefferson or Lincoln whom how they are presented can vary wildly between each generation that followed them, poor plain James Monroe is that same as he ever was.

The first few chapters focus on Monroe's youth and education, the book follows his brief military career during the Revolutionary War. Monroe earns the rank of colonel, and is recommended by Washington to lead a regiment but the war ends before Monroe's regiment can be raised. Monroe would go on to serve in the Virginia House of Delegates, and then into the Congress of the Confederation. After the Constitutional Convention wrote a new constitution for the nation to be presented for ratification, Monroe would take the side of the Anti-Federalists in those debates, despite later becoming a strong supporter of the U.S. Constitution.

Monroe would try to be elected to First Congress but he would lose to another famous Virginian named

James Madison. In 1790, he would earn a seat in the United States Senate; there he would act as a member of the opposition, but in 1794 he was appointed by President Washington to serve as Minister to France. As a foreign minister, he would act in the exact opposite way Washington wanted. His reputation would be so damaged that he had to publish a defense of his actions, which Washington, now retired, bought a copy and critiqued it in the margins.

"Monroe never saw the comments made by Washington, which would have interested him far more than any others. The former President read Monroe's book carefully, jotting comments in the margin of his copy. These extensive notations, occupying more than forty pages in his printed correspondence, constituted a running argument with the opinions of the former Minister. Washington felt, and in this he was correct, that Monroe had been less than just in his refusal to acknowledge the strict neutrality adopted by the administration. Somewhat less correctly Washington believed that Monroe's subservience to France led him to sacrifice the interests of the United States" p.168

He would then go on to serve as Governor of Virginia, which was an honorable but powerless office. Monroe did oversee the suppression of Gabriel's Rebellion, but his effort to pardon the rebels or at least spare their lives was undermined by the executive council. After his time as governor was over he was sent, by President Jefferson, to Europe to serve as our Minister to the Court of St. James.

"The council after approving his request for six pardons, was divided in October when the Governor proposed to reprieve all who were less deeply involved until the legislature should meet. Without the right to break the tie, Monroe had no alternative then to let the executions take place." p.188

During his second tour of Europe, Monroe would meet many interesting personalities, most notably, King George III and Napoleon Bonaparte. It is interesting, unlike Jefferson and more like John Adams, Monroe found himself really liking King George III. Monroe was very disappointed in the way the French Revolution was going. It seemed to him that the British Monarchy had principals that were more republican than the French Republic, which soon was not going to a republic.

"Monroe naturally looked forward with curiosity to his presentation to the King--a rebel encountering his former sovereign. His long-cherished animosity towards George III was modified by the courtesy of the King's reception. When the American Minister voiced the desire of the President to maintain friendly relations with the two nations, the King, expressing reciprocal sentiments, spoke of the great interest he had taken in the welfare of the United States since the Revolution. After these formal remarks George III inquired about conditions in Virginia, and revealed, to Monroe's surprise, a considerable knowledge of the early history of the College of William and Mary. The only embarrassing moment during the interview occurred when the King queried about the French: 'They have no religion, have they?' After a momentary hesitation Monroe cautiously ventured the opinion that he believed there were many in France, who, indeed, had none. Since this seemed to accord with the King's opinion, the reception ended on an amicable note. The new Minister felt that the King, at the request of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Hawkesbury, had made a sincere effort to create a friendly atmosphere."p.225-6

Returning to the United States, he goes on to be Governor of Virginia again, but left soon after Robert Smith had proven to be a disappointment to President James Madison as secretary of state. Monroe was then called to fill that role for the country. In next few years, the War of 1812 erupted and the country was invade and Washington D.C. was sacked and burnt. After President Madison fired John Armstrong, Jr. as Secretary of War, he had Secretary Monroe succeed him and therefore be the nation's war and state chiefs all at the same time. Monroe had served with distinction although what he really wanted a field command. Nevertheless, the country was so pleased with his performance that he was elected President of the United States, over the last Federalist nominee, Rufus King, in 1816.

"For the first time the Presidency seemed to be offered as a reward for meritorious service or as an honor

bestowed on a respected public servant, rather than as a prize to be carried off by the strongest party in a bitterly fought contest." p.357

As Monroe took office the United States began what we refer to as the 'Era of Good Feelings,' because the Federalist Party was now dead, and there was a national consensus in support of President Monroe. During his presidency, we would gain the Florida as a territory; adopt a new code for the Flag of the United States, with thirteen stripes for the original colonies and stars to represent the states. The most important foreign policy accomplishment was enacted with the Monroe Doctrine, which declared the Americas off limits to further colonization and recolonization from European powers. He was reelected without opposition in 1820*, however since no one else ran there was a record low voter turn out. When Monroe declined to run in 1824, that year marked one of the most contested elections of all, which would restore the country's two party system.

"The Monroe Doctrine has had a long and varied history as the keystone of American policy toward Latin America. Only in recent times has it faded into the background, as a result of the imperial connotations attached to it. Most of these subsequent developments were not contemplated by Monroe; if he had guessed at them, he would indeed have been alarmed." p.491

The end of the book focuses on his quite post-presidency, that would only last six years of him leaving the White House. Monroe's legacy would, on occasion, in the chaos that was going to come would often be one of nostalgia. I would highly recommend this book to anyone who would like to know more or anything about our nation's fifth president.

*However he did not get a unanimous vote in the Electoral College, because William Plummer, who did not like Monroe, did not want to see anyone but Washington get that honor.

Steve says

<http://bestpresidentialbios.com/2013/...>

"James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity" by Harry Ammon was originally published in 1971, making it the oldest of the well-read biographies of our fifth president (though this is not a particularly crowded field). Ammon is formerly a Professor of History at Southern Illinois University and the author of "The Genet Mission."

Long regarded as a "go to" biography of Monroe, Ammon's book is clearly intended primarily to inform and not to entertain. Like most presidential biographies of its era, it is long on historical facts and wisdom and relatively short on captivating anecdotes and observations.

Some of the blame may rest on Monroe himself, who had little of Jefferson's worldliness, John Adams's irascibility or the keen political cunning of Madison. Monroe was not a man of tremendous intellectual brilliance or outstanding charisma. He may be a difficult subject around whom to wrap an exciting narrative; Ammon seems to have figured this out and avoided the attempt.

Instead, the author paints a picture of Monroe as a man who, like Washington, was less well-educated (at least formally) than other famous politicians of his era and relied on what we consider "street smarts" and personal likability to succeed. Although occasionally considered a "Founding Father" – a view that is by no means universal – he is the least well known of these historical figures, and the least well articulated of the first five presidents.

Ammon describes a Monroe I did not previously know well: a man who dropped out of college to serve in the Revolutionary War, who served as a member of the Continental Congress, the Virginia House of Delegates and the United States Senate, was diplomat in France, Great Britain and Spain, served as Governor of Virginia, Secretary of State, Secretary of War and, ultimately, as President for two terms. This leaves me feeling rather under-accomplished by comparison.

But while this thorough description of Monroe's public service provides an excellent review of his most important accomplishments, Ammon fails (as do many presidential biographers) to provide much insight into his subject's private life or inner personality. Though the biography briefly describes his upbringing, his family and his personality traits, Monroe's inner-self is never really revealed. We know of his wife and children, but almost nothing about them or how they may have influenced him. Though I am not certain, this may be rooted in his failure to leave many personal documents to posterity (apparently only a single letter to his wife survives).

I found most chapters of Ammon's biography well-written but tedious or dry. At times I was uncertain whether this was the result of dull writing or more the result of what seemed, on balance, a relatively dull presidency. And because I never developed a keen sense of who Monroe was as a person (excepting the author's excellent description of Monroe as a politician) there was little to spice up the stretches of time when his political career provided little controversy or excitement.

While the biography generally proceeds chronologically, Ammon choose to review Monroe's presidency thematically. Unfortunately, this meant I often found myself trying to stitch timelines together from different "themes" (such as the purchase of Florida, relations with England and the Economic Panic of 1819). I have a desire to digest history chronologically in order to more easily understand cause and effect of events (or at least their proximity) and Ammon's approach in these two-hundred pages made that more difficult.

Although there were inspired observations and moments of genius, these were surrounded by lengthy workaday stretches where I could hear one of my college professor lecturing to a large room, unaware whether the class was even awake. Of special value, however, was Ammon's discussion of President Monroe's choice of cabinet officers at the beginning of his first term. This section was particularly interesting, insightful and memorable and was perfectly timed to capture the reader's attention at a critical time in Monroe's life.

Overall, "James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity" was a worthwhile read. I would have preferred a more captivating narrative but, like Monroe, the book is straightforward and unexciting. I also wish Ammon had been more vocal about his own views of Monroe's successes and failures as a politician and leader, but he ultimately leaves those decisions to the reader. But what Ammon does provide is a complete dissection of Monroe's political life that will leave the reader extraordinarily informed, if not often entertained.

Overall rating: 3¾ stars

Adam Gutschenritter says

Very informative, especially the part about the Monroe Doctrine and the Rise of the Giants for the election of 1824/1828, but for the most part I found the book to be slow as Monroe (A founding Father) spent his career as a diplomat and a bureaucrat. The clearest representation I had of him was when the book discussed his being elected due to being the last founding father who wanted the job and because he had worked at the highest levels of government long enough that they should just give it to him.

Matt says

James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity certainly isn't the most engaging or exciting biography to read. However, not knowing much about the man going into the book, I came out with a wealth of knowledge. I think the primary *raison d'être* for a biography is to educate; entertainment is strictly secondary. For that, this one does the trick and shines a light on a man sadly overshadowed by others.

Jeff says

A remarkably detailed account of his life as a public servant, while sadly lacking much personal detail due mostly to Monroe's own desires. My only disappointment is that Ammon wrote almost nothing about Monroe's slave ownership, despite ample opportunities to broach the subject. The book masterfully sets up the biographies of John Quincy Adams--a brilliant and loyal cabinet member, and Andrew Jackson--an eccentric and determined general; the next two American Presidents.

Daniel DeLappe says

Great book. Well written. Politicians never change. Now onto JQA

Sherri says

This is probably my least favorite presidential biography so far. Ammon's sentence structure was confusing and I often I had to re-read sentences to try and figure out what he was saying. However, I did appreciate that Ammon did not "modernize" the direct quotations. I enjoyed being able to experience the original written style.
