**JAMES MONROE’S GOOD WILL TOUR**

**THE SPIRIT OF NEW NATIONALISM**

During his two terms in office (1817–1825), President James Monroe transformed a bitter, divided nation in the wake of the War of 1812 into a unified country with an unprecedented sense of national identity and patriotism. Monroe's tour of New England ushered in the "era of good feelings" by invoking the symbols of the War of Independence and focusing on citizens' common background and victories.

As the last so-called "Virginia Dynasty" president, Monroe inherited a number of national issues from his predecessors—Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison. Among them were the slavery question, American Indian policy, westward expansion, and state-federal government relations. Perhaps the most pressing challenge he faced in his two terms was rebuilding the nation's postwar economy, unity, and sense of nationalism.

The war was the chief preoccupation and major event of James Madison's presidency (1809–1817). Although conflicts with Great Britain had erupted since the U.S. founding, previous chief executives had managed to avoid official hostilities with the parent nation. By Madison's time, war seemed inevitable in order to protect domestic and foreign trade. Although critics argued that a war to protect commerce actually would result in a loss of international consumers of U.S. goods and a wounded national economy, Congress nevertheless answered Madison's request by declaring war against Great Britain in June 1812.

The war went badly: In America's worst moment, British troops burned Washington, D.C. An attempt to conquer Canada failed. Perhaps the worst consequence of the war was the bitter divisions it created within the nation. In December 1814, while peace was being negotiated in Europe, leaders in New England, where opposition to the war was most intense, met at Hartford, Connecticut, to demand changes in the Constitution to curb the war-making powers of the federal government. They threatened to lead New England out of the union if their demands were not met. When peace came with the Treaty of Ghent in December 1814, the nation found itself economically weakened and bitterly divided along political and regional lines.

Monroe, who had served as Madison's secretary of state and at times acting secretary of war during the War of 1812, became president of a nation still coming to terms with what a postwar United States should be. Monroe embraced the opportunity this unique moment afforded him and chose to rally and unify the country through an elaborate personal tour, from the oldest birthplaces of the former colonies to the newly opened West. The tour took place in 1817 in New England, where the hottest opposition to the War of 1812 had seethed. The region was also the home of the Federalist Party, the direct competitor to Monroe's Democratic-Republicans.

The president pursued his goal—healing the bitter rift of party factionalism so recently intensified by war—by invoking the symbol of the nation's first war hero and chief executive, George Washington. This worked on two levels: Monroe was not only the final Virginia Dynasty president, but also the last president to have served in the War of Independence. Monroe orchestrated every detail of his trip to New England to recall the enthusiasm and patriotism of the War of Independence. He journeyed as an independent citizen without official escort or ceremony and paid for his travel expenses out of his own pocket. Instead of the day's current fashions, he wore simple knee-buckled breeches and, significantly, three-pointed, Revolution-era hats.

Where Monroe traveled was just as noteworthy as how he traveled. The president visited Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, careful to make appearances at sites important to either the War of Independence or the War of 1812 and honor veterans in the process. He went to Boston, the birthplace of the Revolution, on the Fourth of July for the anniversary of the nation's independence. While there he visited important symbols of Revolutionary action such as Bunker Hill. Touring more as an old patriot than a new president, meeting with leading political adversaries, and choosing memorable places and dates marked Monroe's New England journey as a tour of goodwill.

Monroe's success was immediate. Enthusiastic locals at each stop along his tour met him with regal pomp and ceremony, flags and songs, as if Monroe had won both the War of Independence and the War of 1812 single-handedly. Celebrations at his many stops and along the routes that connected them turned his modest tour into a triumphant procession. Newspapers wrote about how Monroe's nonpartisan, patriotic appearances seemed focused on unity and healing, proving that his tenure as president would make one people out of a nation that had been deeply divided. One Boston newspaper coined a phrase that would come to describe Monroe's two administrations: Monroe, it was said, had ushered in an "era of good feelings." The positive spirit fed by Monroe's travel revived not only the nation's self-image but also its economy and expansion.

Turning postwar dissent into an opportunity to foster unity and active nationalism was perhaps Monroe's most important achievement in office. As he prepared to leave the executive branch, Monroe understood that bringing the Virginia Dynasty to an end was what the nation needed. Monroe prepared his New Englander secretary of state, John Quincy Adams, to succeed him. Appropriately for one who had linked himself so closely with the Revolutionary experience, Monroe died on July 4, 1831, becoming the third of five presidents to die on the nation's birthday.

Monroe's tour was a symbolic act that not only bound a divided nation but also demonstrated how the memory of the Revolution and American military triumphs could energize and define the nation's self-image. The tour proved that war and the way in which Americans are led to remember their wars could be used as a powerful political force to forge national identity and shape the country's culture

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1. Why is he called then last of the "Virginia dynasty?"  
2. What were the major issues of the day?  
3. What role did Monroe have during the War of 1812?  
4. How did Monroe use the image of George Washington during this tour?  
5. How was the trip funded?  
6. How did his dress and mannerisms endear him to others?  
7. What were some of the place he visited?  
8. Why did he choose these places?  
9. How did the crowds receive him during his trip?  
10. How can politicians today take a lesson from what Monroe did?