

2. Where It All Began: 1776

- a) Now that we are oriented to the distinctive character of modern American life, our goal is to learn how the world came to be this way. No story about America can make any sense without reference to the very fact of its existence, so we begin by answering the question: *where does America come from in the first place?*
- b) The United States of America was born by the adoption of the “Declaration of Independence” by its first leaders (known hence as the “Founding Fathers”) on the fourth of July, 1776.
- c) In the Declaration, we find the reason for the creation of this new country, in words authored by Thomas Jefferson. The purpose of a proper government, Jefferson wrote, is to secure the “unalienable” rights of every person to “*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*”
- d) Until that point, America was part of the British Empire, but the Founding Fathers believed it was impossible to secure rights under its system of government, known as monarchy. They were convinced that only a new and separate government for Americans and by Americans would do.
- e) The Declaration of Independence is, of course, not the whole story. The birth of the United States was a process, which has a name: *the American Revolution*. For the purpose of gaining a “big picture” understanding of American history, however, the cardinal anchor fact of 1776 will symbolize the revolution until we have reason to explore it in greater detail.



American artist John Trumbull captures the moment of Thomas Jefferson's presentation of the *Declaration of Independence* to his fellow Founding Fathers on the 4th of July, 1776.

3. The Way America Originally Was: The Monroe Doctrine 1823

- a) TWWLi has an America in it because it was created in 1776 when the country declared its independence and detached itself from the rest of world, but the world is also the way it is because that America has become the leading nation in the world, fighting the “War on Terror.” What happened? We need more anchor facts to understand 1776 and 9-11-2001 as components of one story in our minds.
- b) In particular, in order to make sense of where we are today, we need to understand how America changed from what it was originally into what it is.
- c) The key lies in the acceptance of a set of principles in early American life, and its replacement by another set of ideas by modern Americans.
- d) The original set of principles is known as the “Monroe Doctrine,” and it was enunciated by James Monroe (one of the youngest the Founding Fathers) as president in 1823.
- e) Monroe identified that America’s “political system” (based on individual rights) was essentially different from that of Europe, and that consequently America should maintain its political separation from the rest of the world.
- f) This included a warning to European empires to stay out of the Americas, and—which is especially significant today—a commitment by America to stay out of the wars of others.
- g) All the Founding Fathers followed this policy leading up to 1823, and it was also followed with varying degrees of consistency for nearly a century thereafter. The acceptance of the Monroe Doctrine by early Americans and its abandonment by modern Americans is a fundamental reason why the world has taken the shape it has.



Early America’s relationship to the world was governed by a set of principles known as the “Monroe Doctrine.”