Episode 795: Liberty, Guns, and 3D Printing: Discussion with Cody Wilson

Guest: Cody Wilson

WOODS: Well, I'm thrilled to have you. I've had a lot of requests to have you on, and there's always a reason to have you on. You're always up to something. There's always a good reason to talk. Your book is a good reason to talk, *Come and Take It*, so I want to talk about that. I know your basic story, the basic story behind what you've been up to. The book really filled in a lot of details for me. Like, I didn't know about the Indiegogo campaign being yanked and stuff like that. I mean, it's a colorful story you have; we'll put it that way.

Let's start with this here: first of all, what the heck is 3D printing? What is the technology behind this? I can understand 2D printing. How does it work?

WILSON: Oh man. Well, 3D printing, or as it kind of first became known as stereolithography or rapid prototyping, was just a way that larger companies, larger firms and universities, were able to cut the development cycle down on new products. So instead of sending out to a plastic processor for a part six weeks away, buying molds and stuff, you could use these laser concepts that developed — you could take a part file from CAD, and then you could cure a photo polymer with some lasers, and you could get a prototype within a 24-, 48-hour period. And then basically this technology was always conceived as just being a way of cutting down development cycles for certain plastic processes and coming up with physical prototypes with like Chrysler and GM and places like that back in the '80s.

But as the prices of all these technologies fell and the ways of doing that type of production proliferated and multiplied, there became lots of different techniques that we all call 3D printing, which are all technically fundamentally different technologies but are all related to the same idea of using three-dimensional files, replicating them or trying to reproduce them in physical media. And this technology is now available to the public, and that's kind of when we first started then bridging that gap and saying not only can we make prototype devices, but we can make functional devices.

WOODS: Obviously I want to talk about your own experiences with it, but I am curious to know what do you think as this technology comes into wider use the effects of it will be on our lives?

WILSON: Well, yeah. I mean, I'm a — Gosh, 3D printing kind of had its high watermark, and now there's been a bit of a backlash. It was just so oversold, and everyone was

already saying, Oh gosh, the new Industrial Revolution is here. Everyone has kind of seen at least a middle template for what we think this revolution might be.

I was never saying the 3D printing that we have of the day is the answer, but I did want to suggest, right, or make this presentation that I thought digital manufacturing specifically — all the different flavors of 3D printing and its complementary techniques and milling and all these other things that computers and laptops and little cheap devices like a tabletop can help you do — I wanted to suggest that these mean direct, dis-intermediated access to politically relevant things. If it's really simple drug components and reagents, if it's really simple firearms, core components of ammunition, these have deep political consequences, I think, just the same way that the 2D printing, the printing press had for, as you know, dissolving the Church and all these other things, the enabling of radical conscience and radical political conscience. I think we're just at the beginning of that, right, and the Internet is going to get us there.

WOODS: Well, what do you think are the kinds of things I might be able to do in my own home, for example, that I would have had to outsource to some big company before?

WILSON: So I'm not the guy — I'm not like Nick Bilton at *The Times* and I think like, Oh, everybody's going to have a 3D printer in their home, but I do think if you're entrepreneurially minded, I think you can have, unlike even ten years ago, you can have the core components of a machine shop in your house. So, simple turning stuff, simple milling stuff. If you want to run a little set of aluminum parts, if you've got an idea for making up parts and you want to go into business for yourself, or in the obvious case with my own business, if you want to get just your foot in the door for firearms manufacturing and start to go into business for yourself that way, you have the devices and files and the techniques to do it today.

So I see it as just complementary to the standard industrial environment for the time being, supplementary in some cases, and then like, okay, fine, there's some replacements that are happening in plastics, but it's still outside of most people's daily lived experience to replace something that they buy from Walmart with something they might otherwise print. I hope that that's not me throwing a damp towel or whatever on the question.

But I do think in the case of guns, for example, we've shown that — Like, we have a machine called the Ghost Gunner that we sell. We've shown that you can have military grade and military spec lower receivers for AR-15, AR-10, 1911. You can make these things in your home to the exact specification that you might otherwise purchase them, and there's a certain, let's say, privacy afforded to you and political, I don't know, dignity afforded to you from being able to make those. You can make them today, you know?

WOODS: Well, reading your book, I think the subtitle, *The Gun Printer's Guide to Thinking Free*, is really apt, because you early on explain how you respond to people who say, Here you're presented with this technology; why don't you use it to produce kidney dialysis machines or something? And you explain what the political and philosophical significance of the gun is.

WILSON: Well, thank you for reading that. That was one of the things that really kind of got under my skin at the time. You know how Rush Limbaugh still does call the media the drive-by media, and so 3D printing, the way that the stories were coming to me and the journalists were coming to me, they would just be doing these ensemble pieces on 3D printing where it was all just about this very naive progressive idea of what technology is, and technology is a very simplified moral force in these people's minds. And so they would come to me and be like, This is incongruent with technology's progressive moral force. Why aren't you making something good? Why aren't you making a good, nice thing?

And we'd go, Well, see, technology has consequences, and we're not interested in the good, nice things that everyone else is making and being good, nice people. We believe that we can create something radically against the narrative with these devices. This device can undermine the narrative. It's subversive, so watch us subvert. And it just didn't meet their template, so I was always frustrated when I was posed the question those ways in the beginning.

WOODS: All right, so talk to me about how you came to do this. I mean, you got involved in 3D printing involving firearms. I want to know what were the circumstances that led to that, and how did you get something like that off the ground? You tried crowdfunding, and then Indiegogo — I guess your campaign was flagged, and they pulled it.

WILSON: (laughing) Oh yeah. It feels almost — I'm nostalgic for that moment now, because we've had such ridiculous moments after that moment that make that one look fun and kind of —

WOODS: (laughing) Yeah, yeah, that's like the good old days, right?

WILSON: Exactly, I love it. There was a time where I was like, Yeah, can you believe it? And now I'm just like, Oh my God, if I only knew. I have a story out in *American Banker* actually this last month that just details the last three years of just the extreme banking problems we've had. But Indiegogo — and I should have known this, and this was just kind of the first signal to me that this was going to be a problem, that getting money for your projects when they're radically libertarian is going to be a problem (laughing).

And so Indiegogo was, I think I started with them because they don't actually have a formal editorial process or approval process with their administrators. You can just start a project, and really only if something is going wrong do the administrators step in or review your project, so there's at least a kind of first pass at freedom there where anyone can just kind of get started up with that. I like that. Kickstarter and the rest of them have to approve your project first before it can go live, and I knew that would probably never work if we were going to literally go out with our hands out and ask people to help us fund the first 3D-printed gun and we were going to put it on the Internet.

So you know, credit where it's due: I was online with them for maybe like 20 days or 17 days or something, and finally once we started getting money, I don't know, some

intolerant liberal found out that he didn't really appreciate it, and he reported it to Indiegogo, and they submarined it, man.

WOODS: Well, meanwhile, you had a YouTube video that had been viewed 600,000 times, and you realized that's great, but it doesn't earn us anything. So then what?

WILSON: (laughing) Yeah, that was before YouTube changed their monetization rules a couple years ago. I figure you're probably aware of some of that. Like, even back in the day you couldn't make a ton of money on YouTube. And that was just in the incident case of having a video that a lot of people have seen. But yeah, I was seeing, like, wow, tons of people are aware of this. But it's one thing to get eyeballs on a project; it's a wholly other thing to activate a subsection of those people who might want to patronize you or fund you.

And so like many people in our movement, I found that just simply asking for people's money isn't really a good way to begin a project. You have to provide a value, a service; you have to give people something they want to purchase. You can't just hope for the charity of strangers.

WOODS: All right, your company is called Defense Distributed?

WILSON: Yes. That's our mother company.

WOODS: Tell me what somebody can get from you guys exactly and how they get it.

WILSON: Okay, well, the last few years the funding of our large lawsuit against the State Department, it's been funded 100% by the sale of our product, the Ghost Gunner, Ghost Gunner CNC machine. And we also sell 80% receivers for the AR-15 and the AR-10 assault rifles. And we sell other products as well. You know, little products here and there.

But basically the Ghost Gunner is our main product line, our flagship product, and so it's a milling machine that's a programmable open source platform. We manufacture the electronics for it; we do all the assembly. Most of the aluminum parts we machine in house. Some of the sheet metal we let other shops in Austin do for us. But it's made in America. You know, we employ a bunch of deadbeat libertarians to assemble it, and we ship it domestic and overseas. And that's what keeps us going. We make a real product that enables people to make guns.

WOODS: All right, so now tell me about what kind of trouble you got into with the government or what was the — What was all this about that you ended up in court? What were you doing?

WILSON: Okay, yeah. Well, the events of the book, *Come and Take It*, are kind of just like the nine months that it took to 3D print the first 3D-printed gun and put it on the Internet and kind of immediately in the narrative as soon as the gun has made it into the void or made it into the real or something like that.

And so immediately after that in 2013 — and a lot of people know this about us, but we couldn't just have a victory lap; we couldn't have like a Donald Trump thank you tour, like, "We did it, y'all." As soon as we put the gun on the Internet, the government responded, and the government responded quite harshly. The Obama administration was directed through their National Security staff to tap the DOJ and the State Department, who then kind of brought my project to its calamitous end.

So I used to be primarily a software company and a file sharing company. I had a big file sharing website — lots of files, not just the first 3D-printed gun. Lots of 3D-printed files. Everybody who was doing guns and 3D printing was sharing it on my platform.

So they demanded that I take down my website. They threatened me with saying that I had violated arms export control laws and the ITAR, a famous set of regulations that they used in the past to delay the public's acquisition of important technology like encryption. And then I was stuck in a set of processes that I'm really not out of. It took me the last two or three years to put together a team and fight back. And finally in May of 2015 I brought them into the western district of Texas, and I brought them to federal court with a constitutional challenge backed by the Second Amendment Foundation.

WOODS: And so how did that go? What was that like?

WILSON: (laughing) Well, you know. You know how these things go, right?

WOODS: (laughing) I ask rhetorically, right?

WILSON: (laughing) Yeah, it's not over. That's the thing, man; you can't — You're writing a big ol' check when it's time to go to federal court. So I've been in court for years, and we're on — let's see now. We're at the fifth circuit. We've been at the fifth circuit since June on a preliminary injunction motion, which they don't really enjoy, and the last panel of judges kind of embarrassingly tried to skirt the simple First Amendment analysis you're supposed to perform when it's a preliminary injunction on a First Amendment question. So look, the court kind of tried to kick the can really hard, and so we put an *en banc* petition in. It looks like they're entertaining it, so we'll probably do an *en banc* at the fifth circuit in late December here.

I mean, it's crazy, right? This is just the opening move, as you know. It's two years in; we're on the opening move; we haven't even gotten to the merits of the case yet. What we're hoping for is that the adults at the fifth circuit will step in, control the constitutional questions, weigh in on the likelihood of success on the merits, and then the government will settle. And then I've been fighting this for so long that now there's a whole new government coming in. You know how it is. I thought it would Hillary Clinton. I'm glad it's Trump, but I mean, that doesn't mean that policies at the State Department change. So look, man, I mean, for the long haul you're trying to wrest something back from the State Department. They've asserted powers that they don't have, and we've got to get some type of precedent out there or have got to defeat it, because they're literally arguing that you can't share gun information with American citizens on the Internet.

WOODS: But yet doesn't that — It kind of seems like people who are — You know, the horse has left the stable here. It's like trying to stop people from reading books on the Internet.

WILSON: I know; I know.

WOODS: The Internet has made that impossible. You can't control the flow of information anymore. Well, likewise, how are they seriously going to be able to control basically digits?

WILSON: I know.

WOODS: I mean, it's really a series of digits being transmitted from one person to another. So in other words, does this mean that this technology in, let's say, a country that doesn't have as robust a protection of gun rights as we do here — I mean, for all our complaints, we have better gun right protections here than a lot of places do. But does it mean that this basically invalidates to some degree or frustrates government efforts against gun ownership, because as long as you've got the 3D technology you can print out the gun?

WILSON: Well —

WOODS: They won't allow you to buy it, but you can print it out. Is that right?

WILSON: Yeah, and that's actually the biggest argument in court. The State Department can come in and say, Your Honors, if Americans can post this stuff on the Internet, the United States will be responsible when Saudi Arabia gets made because people are now arming themselves because they have access to the Internet. This now violates the laws of our partners in foreign affairs. And literally that's the argument. Like, well, Americans can't be so free that it interrupts the placid domesticity of our — I don't know, of our foreign partners? Like, what? Constitutional rights can't be so strong that it might interfere with other governments' willingness to control their populations? It's embarrassing, but that's literally the argument.

WOODS: All right, let me ask you, though, a devil's advocate question. Let's imagine you have a purely, purely libertarian private-property society. There's no government at all. And you have a lot of different neighborhoods and whatever, and there are different rules in different neighborhoods, and everybody knows the rules, and if you don't like them you move to another neighborhood.

WILSON: Sure.

WOODS: But I mean, presumably we would voluntarily reach some kind of understanding that at least in this particular geographical area, if you are mentally defective we really don't want you buying a gun.

WILSON: Yeah, yeah.

WOODS: So the libertarian solution wouldn't be absolutely everybody under all circumstances winds up getting one. We would voluntarily come to our own understanding about that. But with your technology, wouldn't anybody, the craziest person in the world, be able to get a gun? And isn't that why people are concerned about it? So how do you answer that?

WILSON: Well, I'd make a bit of a distinction between those two examples. So I'm with you on the covenant community-type question. In fact, I'm with you on the current situation of common law. I mean, I think actually if someone's demonstrated that they can be prone to violence and that they're an imminent threat that a court of the present day in the current situation should be able to divest them of their weapons. I'm actually pretty reasonable on this.

But on the second question, if it's about — Oh gosh, you're going to have to repeat the exact phrasing that you have for the second part of your question so that I can get it right.

WOODS: Well, the gist of it is that in a real libertarian society, that doesn't necessarily mean that everybody would be walking naked down the street and stuff like that. In some cities they might walk naked down the street, but in others people would agree we don't do that. Well, likewise, we would voluntarily come up with some kind of limitation here.

WILSON: Yeah, yeah.

WOODS: But your technology in the current context more or less allows everybody to get hold of a gun.

WILSON: Oh, there it is, yeah. Okay, so again, I don't quite agree that I — My technology only allows everyone to get a gun in the same way that a public library might. We have a certain esteem for the commons and having a body of knowledge for anyone — I'm mean, in the same way that your hypothetical poses to me, anybody can go learn to make ricin or can learn how to synthesize or get the enzymes for cyanide. I mean, anyone can do that today, right, and maybe there's a distinction to be made for, okay, but no one's made a digital package that enables you to immediately download cyanide from the Internet, but I would say that this is not true of the gun situation either.

For many years there have been solid models on the Internet that enable you to better fabricate guns for yourself. There still isn't the kind of doomsday button where I just press it, and poof, a gun. We're still very much along a continuum of just kind of better allowing people with less and less expert knowledge to better fabricate guns for themselves, but it's still an enormously complex situation that requires mostly machine components of different metals and materials. The printing is still supplementary, by and large.

So I would just say I think a healthy liberal — and I mean liberal in the classical sense — a healthy liberal attitude to knowledge and to free inquiry is no different from the respect for this type of knowledge being in a public library versus this type of knowledge being immediately accessible on the Internet. I think it's identical, and I'm standing on pretty solid ground, because even the Office of Legal Counsel at the DOJ, after Timothy McVeigh did what he did, they studied whether we should remove bomb plans from the Internet. Maybe we should not make it easy for people to make bombs and blow up federal buildings. And the government came back and said, well, this suffers from pretty extreme First Amendment problems. And I agree. I think we have to have a healthy attitude about freedom of access to information, even if we're a bit uncomfortable about what that free access to knowledge means.

WOODS: In 2012, *Wired* magazine called you one of the 15 most dangerous people in the world. What did they say about you?

WILSON: Oh my gosh, yeah, I remember that.

WOODS: (laughing) Yeah, I would think you would.

WILSON: (laughing) I mean, that was a good time for me. I liked that. They simply — This was kind of before Defcad, my first file sharing site, even existed. So they were simply judging me on my motivations and my intent, and that intent was simply that people would have access to guns through the Internet. And they thought, like any good progressive would, Uh oh, this spells the end of gun control, and that's very dangerous. Well, fine. I guess it is dangerous to a certain way of thinking about the world, you know? I mean, to a certain kind of desire for control I suppose it's quite dangerous, but I don't feel like I'm in the same league with one of these rogue states or one of these weird dictators or something.

WOODS: No, nor do I, but isn't it interesting that *Wired*, which I assume — not having read it very much, just a couple of articles —

WILSON: Sure.

WOODS: I assume it has a kind of a progressive leaning. It's interesting how progressives and traditionalists alike have — On the one hand, progressives are all about how wonderful technology, but, but, but, it has to have our aims in mind. And likewise, traditionalists, well, yeah, technology might make our lives easier in some ways, but it's going to spread terrible ideas and whatever. It's actually not that common to come across people who just embrace it flat out.

WILSON: I agree, and you know what the tragedy is, Tom? *Wired* used to be a libertarian publication.

WOODS: Is that so? Really? Geez, that's a shame.

WILSON: It really was, man, and if you go back — I mean, there's classic editions from the '90s that are in anthologies that I really enjoy. Its first set of editors had declared in '94 and '95 the Internet was going to permanently free society and there was going

to be this libertarian utopia. I mean, this really was like a geek set who were digital libertarians, and that's why they started the publication. And of course its leftward drift is totally complete. It's a Condé Nast publication. It's no different from reading *Slate*. It's like *Slate* articles about iPhones these days, you know? That's what it is.

Although I really respect the work of people like Andy Greenberg at *Wired*. He's done — While he was at *Forbes* he did the first important interviews with Julian Assange, and he knows the work of Timothy May and a lot of the important digital and hacking people of the day. He's doing the work at *Wired* today of cataloging the important kind of events in technology that are still thoroughly libertarian and that still have political relevance. But I agree with you by and large. *Wired* is wholly a liberal publication now.

WOODS: I know our time is limited, but I want to ask you if you wouldn't mind, can you say before I let you go a few words about your work with bitcoin?

WILSON: Oh sure. Well, I was lucky to meet Amir Taaki. Amir Taaki was one of just a handful of people in 2012 who intimately understood bitcoin. And really probably there's still only that many people that do, although it's really popular now to have a bitcoin business and to have a bitcoin brand. But Amir convinced me really early on before it had really taken hold that bitcoin was a way of undermining the controlled closed loop of financial services and institutions, and I believe it. I'm long bitcoin; I believe in its possibilities as a currency, not just as a stable currency, but also as a technique or a tool of people's liberation and ultimate freedom. I'm a partisan for bitcoin, Tom Woods, and I think everyone should be.

WOODS: Now, what is your — What I have here is, "He is also a cofounder of the Dark Wallet bitcoin, the storage technology," and I don't actually know what that is.

WILSON: Well, a couple years ago we were in a wallet game. We were trying to give people — You know, bitcoin has certain promises about freedom, and it suggests anonymity or pseudonymity, but not a lot of bitcoin companies really work on the pseudonymous or anonymous problem. These days there's a few more, but like Darkcoin became Dash, and like Samurai Wallet and other projects are very kind of homespun and not well funded. Everybody takes a particular kind of detour as they get successful in bitcoin and accept investment and regulation. There aren't just huge and many well funded efforts to give anonymity to bitcoin, and we believe that bitcoin's ultimate promise, if it's going to be deeply libertarian, is it has to afford people stealth transactions and anonymity, a certain kind of — I mean, let's say it: money laundry is going to be an important part of the digital money of the future if we're to evade super state surveillance.

So Dark Wallet was our first attempt at an answer to making transactions anonymous. And it's still in its beta. It's been many years in development now, and it's gone through many different anarchist hands, but Amir Taaki is working on it again. And I stay hush-hush on these things. Whenever something good is ready and we feel like we can bring it out, I'd like to announce it again, but in the meantime the bitcoin community has moved quite far ahead of where we were. So we'll see what happens.

WOODS: Well, of course this would be yet another thing that the federal government would be unhappy about.

WILSON: Oh sure.

WOODS: I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that.

WILSON: Well, I've been in trouble about it before. I mean, little things. Look, I have to respond to subpoenas with Defense Distributed all the time, so I'm always more in trouble with Defense Distributed on the daily. But yeah, at some point if the Dark Wallet beta comes out and it's everything we want it to be, I suppose we'll be in a lot of trouble. But we know a lot of the regulations. We know a lot of the financial laws, and as long as we don't operate in the current set of laws, as long as we don't operate Dark Wallet as a service or a business, it's just a piece of code that people can use, it's difficult to put me or any other American that works on it in jail, at least day one (laughing).

WOODS: Right, right, right. Is it okay for me to tell people your age?

WILSON: Yeah, man.

WOODS: All right, so you're 28. You're 28 years old, and I'm sitting here talking to you; we've been talking for like 25 minutes, and I can tell that behind each one of your sentences is 58 paragraphs further that I could get —

WILSON: (laughing) Oh, maybe.

WOODS: — and reading your book I felt exactly the same way. So what I'm wondering is, I'm sure you're busy doing all these things, but a guy with your mind and the things you've been up to, you're such an interesting person, if you don't have a podcast or you're not emailing or blogging regularly, then why not? Because people will want to hear from you.

WILSON: Man, yeah — Thank you, by the way.

WOODS: I love giving other people jobs to do. I'm good at that.

WILSON: Well, I just — ah, man, I've been so in the woods, bringing in my latest machine shop; I'm in a new factory now in Austin, and I just, I always feel like the work of the literal doing is so overwhelming that it's almost an indulgence for me to have a blog or something. But I think you're right. I've thought about this a lot this year, like if I wanted to say something, I have pretty limited reach, actually. I have to wait for someone to give me an interview. I have a pretty meager Twitter following. I'm not even on Facebook. So I don't really have the reach; I just kind of have reach through the things that we do. I don't know, man.

WOODS: Yeah, but look, you'd get the *Tom Woods Show* bump, right? You come on here, and a lot of people would start listening.

WILSON: (laughing)

WOODS: I'm not joking. I get a lot of podcasters who get a lot of new listeners when they come on here.

WILSON: Hey, I've known about you a long time. I'm really glad that we finally got to talk. Zach Cuban, my — Maybe you even know him; you've met him a couple times, I think. But Mr. Cuban is a huge fan of yours. I've known about you for many years, and I've seen you at CPAC in the past. I went to CPAC in 2011, I think.

WOODS: Oh geez, that was my favorite CPAC. It's too bad we didn't say hello then. At least we're doing it now.

WILSON: Well, you were Tom Woods, man. I was nobody.

WOODS: Oh, get out of town.

WILSON: I'm serious.

WOODS: Are you allowed to say where you live, or do you live in an undisclosed location? Like Dick Cheney.

WILSON: Oh, you know. I live in the — Does he really not reveal where he's — ?

WOODS: No, I remember when 9/11 was happening they shunted off Dick Cheney to "an undisclosed location." (laughing) I never forgot that.

WILSON: Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness. Yeah, yeah. No, I live in Austin, Texas, and I work there.

WOODS: So you do? I get to Austin every once in a while, so we've got to — You know, we're still on the air here. Here we are shooting the breeze (laughing).

WILSON: No, Tom, I'd love to buy a drink for you, man. I mean, all the compliments from you aside, I know that you're the heavy hitter, man, and —

WOODS: Well, that's really good of you to say. Well, you're doing really, really interesting stuff, and I've got to have you on — What I need to do next time is get my more technology savvy listeners to send me questions that I should ask you, and then maybe we'll try another time down the road.

WILSON: Oh, it'd be my pleasure, man, and I'm so pleased we could talk.

WOODS: Thanks a lot. Where should I direct people? Of course the show notes page for this episode, 795, is TomWoods.com/795, so I'm going to link to your book. I'm going to link to any site you tell me right now. Where should people find you?

WILSON: Oh, we're at GhostGunner.net. That's where we sell our products, and that's how you get on our mailing list and things like that, so that's probably the best place to go.

WOODS: All right, so GhostGunner.net, and the book is *Come and Take It: The Gun Printer's Guide to Thinking Free*. I'll link to both of these things at TomWoods.com/795. All right, I'm going to let you go, but I appreciate your time, Cody. Thanks so much.

WILSON: Oh, I had a fun time. It was a pleasure to meet you.