Episode 933: Now James Madison Is Targeted by the Iconoclasts

Guest: Kevin Gutzman

WOODS: All right, tell me about what's going on in Madison, Wisconsin with James Madison High School.

GUTZMAN: Well, there's actually a high school in Madison called James Madison Memorial High School, and a senior there, Mya Berry, decided that she wanted to rename James Madison Memorial High School. So she created a petition, which hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people signed, saying we want to rename the school.

And why is that? Well, she says, "With all the injustice I and others face in James Madison Memorial High School, do you truly think it's appropriate to glorify a man that enslaved my ancestors? With the education disparity between black and white students being a huge concern in the Madison Metropolitan School District, and if you truly care about black students, you would change the name of Memorial High School."

So her idea is, well, we need to rename this school something else. But then, I understand, after that idea had come up, the idea arose: well, you know, actually, it's kind of popular among the black students to call the place the Madison High School, because then they can refer to the school as Mad Town. So the next idea was, well, instead of renaming James Madison Memorial High School for someone else or something else, we should just drop the James and Memorial and call it Madison High School — which I think is hard to parody.

So essentially, it looks to me as if what we have here is a kind of copycat movement, you know? Often when there's a mass shooting or something, police will say we need to watch out for copycats. And here we have apparently a young woman who's decided I like the idea of being involved in a petition drive and, hey, I can start one at my own high school, but when it comes down to it, I really don't want to rename the school after all, so let's just call it Madison. Well, who is that Madison exactly? And come to think of it, who's the Madison in Madison, Wisconsin?

WOODS: [laughing] Right.

GUTZMAN: And of course the answer is it's the same Madison. We have in Connecticut a Madison. It's very common across the country that there are towns called Madison; there are counties called Madison; there's a river called Madison. The one building in the Library of Congress is the Madison Building, and so on. So what are we going to do

about all of this? Or more properly, I think, what frame of mind leads somebody to the conclusion that, well, we should rename anything that's named for anyone who owned slaves at any point?

And that I think is the most obnoxious element of this. We have kids in this case who have decided they're going to circulate this petition, and it seems to me to be an opportunity for an intervention, as they say, by the adults to, I don't know, talk about James Madison and say what it was about him that was of interest and why contemporary Americans might think, well, there's something about his life that one might want to know about. But that doesn't seem to be happening at all.

And in fact, I had a discussion about this with the host of a Madison, Wisconsin radio program a couple of weeks ago, and she said no, there had been no kind of public discussion of Madison's legacy or any such, and how surprising is that? Well, I'd think not at all surprising. One gets a feeling that, to a large extent, these kids or other people who are involved in these petition drives are being manipulated by — well, by people who are kind of behind the curtain. And what the general goal is, I think is pretty obvious. I think the point of this entire thing, or at least if it's not some Oz's plan, it's certainly going to be the product of this general current in American society, is just to undermine any appreciation for some of the most important elements of our culture, certainly our political culture, which, of course, Madison is closely identified with.

WOODS: Well, you were saying this is an opportunity for adults who are knowledgeable to say something about Madison, and it so happens I know a Madison biographer, actually. [laughing] As it turns out, right? So I'll give you an opportunity to do just that in a minute. But I didn't know about the angle of the story in which the initiator said that the disparity in I guess academic achievement between blacks and whites being what it is, we especially under these circumstances can't be honoring James Madison. But it's very, very tenuous, the connection there. Obviously you can go ahead and rename anything you want to. It's not going to have anything to do with the disparity between blacks and whites that seems to be on display at every single school district in the entire United States. No matter what the buildings are called or no matter what programs are established or whatever, that disparity still persists.

GUTZMAN: Right, and this actually is a kind of a cartoon illustration of the weakness of the general argument that the source of most problems in American society is racism. So why do we have disparity between black and white students' achievement in James Madison Memorial High? Well, it's because of societal racism and people are oppressed and that's why they don't do as well in calculus or whatever. I would hope that I wouldn't have to say much more about that. That's just so obviously ridiculous.

And the reason why I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation the general reflex of law enforcement when some notorious criminal act occurs is to say, Watch out for copycat episodes, is that it looks to me as if that's got to be what's going on here. There've been drives to get rid of commemorations and monuments and other such around the country. They've been in the news, especially in New Orleans and Memphis. We've heard this kind of stuff — and the U.S. capital and I guess the capital of South Carolina, in Columbia, we've heard this kind of thing. And so people say, Well, I should be involved in that too. So it's protest first and come up with a reason

later. And the idea that if you call the high school James Madison Memorial High School, black students are going to receive lower grades than they otherwise would have, you're charitable I think to call that a tenuous relationship. I'm certain there's no relationship.

WOODS: Yeah, that's really what I meant [laughing].

GUTZMAN: Right. So people ought to be told what it is about Madison that made people think in the first place that they'd like to name their town after him or they'd like to name this high school after him and why it is that his work is still important, notably to black students, to all of us. So notice that the adults, the authorities nowadays seem never to do that. They don't seem to make the case for their inheritance. They don't seem to make the case for our traditions. And that is just entirely clear in the fact that these kids see the name James Madison and think of nothing but, Well, he was a slave owner. I don't want to discount the fact that he was a slave owner, but that's I think not the main thing to know about him.

WOODS: All right, so then let's talk about that. And let's talk to — I don't want to treat my audience this way, but let's talk the way you would talk to the general public, among which you'll find some people who know something about Madison, but the bulk of which know not much more than the name.

GUTZMAN: Well, sure, the first thing to know about James Madison is he's the fellow who at age 25 coined the phrase "free exercise of religion." And not only did he play the lead role in having that principle included in the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776 — which is the first American Declaration of Rights and became a kind of template for several other states' declaration of rights — but he also was the fellow who, as a congressman in 1789, wrote what became the First Amendment to the federal Constitution, which of course also includes that formula, "free exercise of religion." And as a member of the Virginia state legislature, he was the chief sponsor of Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which laid out the argument that government shouldn't be punishing people or forcing people or otherwise giving people civil disabilities on the ground of their religion or lack thereof.

So if he had done nothing else — and it's not the case that he did nothing else, but if he'd done nothing else, that would be enough for us to say, well, in the world in 2017, one of the best things about American political culture is we aren't constantly in a conflict among various varieties of Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox Jews, agnostics, Hare Krishna, Tom Cruise, whatever — Mormons. So this is something to appreciate, and it's something that benefits us every day.

But it's not only that, of course. Madison's also a fellow who was instrumental in adding about — well, at the time, it was more than half the territory of the United States, the Louisiana Territory, to the United States, which redounded to the benefit of the world, I think. If the Louisiana Territory were a sleepy northern province of Mexico, the world would be a totally different and I'm guessing worse place. So there's that.

Madison also took a leading role in ensuring that we'd have constitutional recognition of freedoms of speech and press and assembly and so on. And besides that, in pushing for republican federal government instead of what might have been a more European

Union-looking arrangement, which is one way of understanding the Articles of Confederation. That was the way that was going, I think.

So there are other things too, but Madison is just somebody who's central to the development of American political society, including some of our most important distinguishing principles, and I can't believe that these petitioners had any idea of any of this. So it's painful to hear this kind of thing. And you can kind of imagine — I don't know, but I think if you were watching television in Madison, Wisconsin, you've probably seen the superintendent and the principal saying how proud they are of these petitioners to be politically active at this age and so on, and this tends to be what we get when kids go out and do this kind of thing. But they are — so far as I can tell, and I've read quite a lot of reporting about this petition drive, they are without a clue about Madison's role in establishing American political culture. So it's pitiful. It's a shame. It's just emblematic of the low state of public education in much of the country these days.

WOODS: But they would say, Look — well, let's try to figure out the best thing they could say. If you point all this stuff out to them, they would say, That's all very well, but surely there's some threshold where we have to say, regardless of his merits, a major, major moral demerit overshadows them. Like for example, if we knew he shot ten people in cold blood for no reason, we probably wouldn't have statues to him regardless of his contributions. So they would say that slavery is just along a continuum to shooting ten people in cold blood.

GUTZMAN: Well, that's true. I suppose yelling at your kid is on that continuum too. But there's kind of an unhistorical sensibility that people have nowadays about these kinds of questions. So if you look at somebody who lived, say, 1,000 years ago and ask, How did he think women ought to be treated in marriage, the answer would be, Well, women were completely subject. Okay, did he complain about that? No, he didn't. So he was an oppressor of women. Let's not memorialize him. Well, okay, but what about if everybody else was doing that too and nobody had any idea that it shouldn't be that way. Well, that's not an excuse. We don't want to memorialize that anyway.

So I do agree that there are kind of free-standing moral principles that should be applied in judging the lives of people who lived in the past, but on the other hand, where our moral principles are of a recent vintage, then it seems to me that it doesn't make sense to enforce them retrospectively against people who lived a long time ago.

And so that's a longwinded way of saying when James Madison was born in Orange County, Virginia in the very middle of the 18th century, slavery was accepted as kind of an unobjectionable institution everywhere and it always had been. And what happened over time was that beginning essentially in the United States, in what are now the United States, people came to think no, actually slavery is inappropriate. We shouldn't have slavery. And Madison was part of that. So he wasn't one of the people who were arguing against that; he was one of the first group of people who begin to think, You know, there's something just wrong about slavery.

So for example, during the Revolution, in the Virginia legislature there came a proposal — and there were these kinds of policies in some other states. There came a proposal to reward people who would sign up to be in the Continental Army by giving

them land grants in the western part of what was then Virginia — and Virginia at that point extended all the way to Wisconsin. So the proposal was, in the middle of the Revolution in Virginia's legislature, let's give people bounties for investment that consist of land grants in, say, Kentucky or West Virginia and slaves. And Madison's response was no, we don't want to have slave bounties for enlisting in the Revolution because we're fighting for freedom and slavery is inconsistent with the goals of the Revolution. So actually, this proposal was defeated largely through James — and in fact, Madison kind of rallied some other people he knew in the legislature to oppose this.

So there are other things too that mark Madison not just as a guy who was born a slave owner, lived a slave owner, and died a slave owner, but as somebody who was active in American politics at the dawning of the day of anti-slavery and was part of it. He was part of the movement that eventually got rid of slavery in the United States. So does that mean that the people he held as slaves weren't held as slaves? No, it doesn't mean that. But again, it's not historical to think, "How do we think ought to be treated now? Well, did some guy who lived 3,000 years ago act that way? No, he didn't; therefore, he's an ogre." And Madison again was living right at the cusp of this change from slavery being universally morally accepted to being more or less universally morally held in opprobrium. And again, he was part of this development. He wasn't a resistor to it. He was a somebody who helped in its success.

And there are other things that he did about it too, but the point of it I think is clear, that it's wrongheaded to associate Madison with kind of fat, dumb, and happy slave owners. That was not his position in this.

WOODS: All right, let's pause just for a minute to thank our sponsor.

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Okay, and of course, Kevin, I remind people that you are the author of *James Madison and the Making of America*, so people can find out almost anything they want to know about Madison, including the connection between Madison and slavery, which is something like the opposite of what these folks think it was if they even have given it any thought. But let's talk more broadly now about this — because this really is an instance, as you say — it's a copycat episode almost certainly of a broader trend toward iconoclasm and taking down monuments because they offend modern sensibilities.

And it makes me think if I were a leftist and somebody were going to put up a statue of me, I would basically think to myself, Well, it'll be nice having a statue of me up for 20 years. And then 20 years later, they will be more enlightened than they are today and then they'll be demanding the removal of the statue, but those will be 20 glorious years that I'll have my statue up. So it seems like there's no reason to expect that anybody being honored today would still be honored by these people in 50 or 100 years, because at that point, it will be that they didn't favor some crazy idea that no one in his right mind at that time favored and so we can't support them.

I mean, leftism has just become so — I guess maybe I don't want to say "has become." It's become manifest how revolutionary it is, that it just eats its own. It can't ever

stop. It has to keep overturning and overturning and overturning. And then when it's done overturning, it goes back and overturns what it started to do 50 years earlier.

GUTZMAN: Right, which is — we said in the earlier segment that the people who are protesting James Madison's name being used for a Madison, Wisconsin high school were devoid of the historical sensibility, and I guess one way to summarize leftism is that it's the absence of a historical sensibility. It's a kind of societal solipsism, you know? Whatever we think is the definition of morality and this is a universal statement. So if somebody who lived 30 years ago thought that for a 14-year-old to decide what I really need is to have surgical removal of my penis and then for people to start calling me Clarisse — if people 30 years ago thought that sounds like a mental problem, then they are awful and we should erase their names; we should remove them from the photos. They can't stand next to Comrade Stalin in our memory.

And I guess that's the way it's going to work, but you can see that what this means is — Well, the Ancient Romans had this idea called *pietas*, which was an idea that there was a proper kind of — it wasn't quite reverence, but there was a proper respect and holding dear of what people have inherited. You should recognize the goodness in what you have received from past generations. And contemporary leftism is just the absence of *pietas*. There is just nothing about people who lived before that should be celebrated or even appreciated or remembered at all. And it's not clear to me that it will stop. I think we've seen signs of it for decades.

I mean, actually one thing that comes to mind is, I remember 20 or 30 years ago when they decided to put a statue of Franklin Roosevelt in Washington, D.C.; it was going to have his wife in it too. And there was Roosevelt in a wheelchair without his cigarette holder. Now, this was a way that he never wanted to be seen. He never wanted to be seen in a wheelchair and he always had the cigarette holder, which was kind of a symbol of aristocratic panache. And his wife always had her stole and it was always some kind of animal pelt, and so they had to show her without that because today leftists don't want you wearing an animal pelt. And so even Franklin Roosevelt has been politically corrected in our iconography.

And not only that, but at the moment of course there's been news that at Thomas Jefferson's university, there are people on the faculty and there are hundreds and hundreds of students who don't want the president of the university to send out emails to the campus "community" with quotations of Thomas Jefferson because, you know, Thomas Jefferson was a slave owner and I didn't come here to be associated with Thomas Jefferson and it's just —fill in the blanks. So I'm perfectly happy to be on the faculty of this institution that was entirely Thomas Jefferson's creation, but I don't want to ever hear his name because, you know, he's not politically correct in 2017.

Now, on one hand, there's something kind of vaguely poetic about that because Jefferson made a point of not having pietas [laughing]. But on the other hand, it's wrong. It just strikes me on a visceral level as wrong. And of course I'm Eastern Orthodox, so iconoclasm is a heresy in itself, but even when it comes to these secular kind of images, it strikes me that a lot of these people whose memories were promoted by past generations actually contributed to our own health and happiness today, and the memorials are to the things that they did that contributed to our health and happiness and our freedom, and so they should be commemorated. We

aren't just standing in the middle of a desert. We came to be in, historically speaking, a lush, verdant place, and it was the doing of past people who sacrificed to put us here.

So it's painful, man. It's just painful. It's painful to see these kids — and a lot of times it's not kids. A lot of times it's really kind of howling, unhappy leftists who are doing these kinds of things. They are going to make it impossible for future generations to have proper appreciation of what their ancestors did. So no, let's have it stop.

WOODS: I had Brion McClanahan on along with Pastor Larry Beane, whom, if you don't know him, you would really, really enjoy a long conversation with him. He's the pastor of a Lutheran church in Louisiana. Anyway, we were talking about what happened with the taking down of the monuments in New Orleans and then, again, this seems to be the tip of the iceberg; it's really gaining momentum in a number of places. And I'm curious to know your thoughts. I know you have a bit of a difference of opinion to some extent with Brion on this, even though you guys are very friendly and all that. But even still, let's say that you were to say that the Confederate cause was a reprehensible cause — even if you said that, could you make a case for not dismantling all the monuments?

GUTZMAN: Well, my own feeling about the Confederate cause is that states have a right to secede even if I don't approve of their reason for seceding. Now, when it comes to those particular memorials in New Orleans, I don't understand — and across the South generally, I don't understand, for example, that the image of Robert E. Lee is in every place in every case a symbol of white supremacy. People admire Robert E. Lee because they thought of him as kind of a classic Southern Christian gentleman, and it was very common a generation or two ago in the South for people to have images of him and Jesus on their walls. So it seems to me that the iconoclastic impulse in the South then is more about kind of saying, okay, we're the power now and we're going to tell you what to do, which I suppose is understandable, but lamentable.

And besides that, it gets back to a couple of other things we were talking about before. Well, first, there is this impulse to get rid of Christian memorials, and that's one thing a Robert E. Lee or a Stonewall Jackson is. But then there also is this problem of, okay, so if you say that, for example, in the South we're going to denude the public square of images of anybody who was a slave owner, whom does that leave exactly? Now, that's not to say that I don't think that there have been people who shouldn't be memorialized. For example, the Ben Tillman statue in South Carolina, that ought to go, because that's nothing but a white supremacy monument.

And in fact — you and I have talked about this before — I think that when in the wake of Brown v. Board of Education, Southern states ran up Confederate battle flags over their state capitols and incorporated some imagery from the Confederate battle flag into their state flags, well, that made the Confederate battle flag stand for keeping segregation. So those ought to have gone.

But that's not how I understand, again, Thomas Jefferson or James Madison or even in every instance Robert E. Lee. There were after the Civil War many, many, many women across the South who found, okay, we don't have any men, or the ones we do have are maimed or they have PTSD for life, or, you know, we have these problems. So

they did fundraising efforts and they memorialized the Confederate cause, and what did that mean? Well, that's war in which granddad lost his arm and he's never been the same.

So actually, I've long told people that I thought Charlottesville, Virginia had the best public statuary of any small to medium-sized town in America. It just has these amazing equestrian images. But now those are under attack, and actually, the city government voted to take down a couple of the ones that I thought were most spectacular, and there's an ongoing conflict between the city and the state government over that now in Virginia. And this strikes me as eliminating a part of the history that needs not to be eliminated. So I think the proper response, if you've decided that your historical iconography is lamentable in some sense, is to have public discussions about that. We're not talking about — it's not Himmler. It's more complicated. So that I think is the way a historian would answer this kind of an impulse.

And so, likely, Brion and I don't agree about that entirely, but I think we end up in most cases in the same place. Now, on the other hand, Jeff Davis, if you read his book, he's defending the Confederacy on the ground that we have a right to keep these institutions and so on, and so that I think is different than Robert E. Lee, but I suppose that's a whole discreet conversation.

So the bottom line is what I would like to see in all these cases is more conversation, more informed discussion, less rushing to use the kids or the uninformed public in pursuit of one's own ideological cause, but instead a chance to have a rounded discussion of the history of these things. And certainly that would mean that the president of UVA is perfectly free to quote Thomas Jefferson whenever she wants and James Madison High School should continue to have his name and people would know more about these things than they apparently do at the moment.

WOODS: Well, that is something to be wished for and probably "wished for" is about as close as we'll get to it, unfortunately, but in the meantime, for those people who do want that, I would point out that you and Brion and I all teach U.S. history over at LibertyClassroom.com, where you can just get our stuff on the go. It's not like you have to tune in at 4:15 PM and sit in front of your computer screen. You can listen on the go. We've got a mobile app now. We've got some updates to that app coming up soon. But anyway, definitely check out LibertyClassroom.com because it's great stuff. And of course you can get a coupon at LibertyClassroom.com/coupons. I don't always give that away, but I'm feeling generous this morning.

Kevin, enjoy your summer, but surely there'll be some other outrage between now and the end of the summer; I'll have to get you back. But thanks a lot.

GUTZMAN: You're welcome, Tom.