Episode 321-A Renegade History of the United States
Guest: Thaddeus Russell
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WOODS: One of the things I like about you is that I can't quite figure you out completely. That's great. You're not a cookie-cutter anything. You're just a guy with a lot of really interesting insights, and you don't care if you borrow insights from this person or that person or that person. If somebody has an insight, you're interested in it. Oddly enough, this is an extremely rare characteristic. So congratulations.

RUSSELL: (laughs) Well, that's really flattering. That's exactly how I'd like to be thought of, actually, and it's how I think of myself. You're right, I don't really fit into any particular category. I borrow from many different influences that we can talk about, but I am sure there's always some pretty serious discontent with any political strain of thought. So I like to be free-floating, yes, and a moving target. That's the most important thing.

WOODS: Well, one thing that is interesting about your book *A Renegade History of the United States* is that the blurbs kind of illustrate the point that I just made, if you look at the different sorts of people who have blurbed it. I blurbed it and Alan Brinkley blurbed it. Now, Alan Brinkley is about the most straight-laced, but also, you know, politically left-liberal guy you could imagine, and he was my dissertation director.

RUSSELL: He was mine as well.

WOODS: Oh, he was yours as well. I didn't realize that.

RUSSELL: Yeah.

WOODS: Okay, well, so now I know how you got him to blurb the book. Because I was going to say, it doesn't really seem like his kind of book.

RUSSELL: No, Alan is unusual in that you're right: he's a fairly doctrinaire left-liberal, but he has tremendous integrity.

WOODS: That is exactly how I felt. I thought that even though we didn't agree on politics, what difference does that make? He's my dissertation adviser, and it's his job to critique my chapters, and make it into a good work, and get me through the defense, and that's exactly what happened, and he was terrific through it.

RUSSELL: He's one of the only people from that world who has treated me fairly throughout my career, actually.

WOODS: Well, that's kind of how I felt.

RUSSELL: Yeah, my work—my dissertation under him and my subsequent work especially has been a full frontal assault on everything he believes. He's treated me well and gotten me jobs and written letters of recommendation and written blurbs for my book. So I can't complain. It is quite unusual. I am very much used to being stabbed in the back or ignored or slighted or dismissed by people of his ilk. So it's a great credit to him.

WOODS: Now, I hope we're not getting into too inside baseball for the listeners, but Alan Brinkley, of course, his father was David Brinkley, the famous newsman. He's a very, very prominent historian. He was provost at Columbia University for a number of years. He's a professor of history there. He was a professor of history at Harvard before that. He has every establishment credential you could ask for.

I just want to tell this little story that happened to me. For some reason when I was in New York I don't how many years ago, I consented to be interviewed by I don't know if it's the Columbia Political Review—some undergrad Columbia publication, and they wanted to interview me because I am kind of notorious libertarian, and I got my Ph.D. at Columbia. I could tell right off the bat that this was a person who was not exactly Thaddeus Russell. He already had labeled and pigeonholed me. It didn't matter what I said. I tried to explain that I'm not really like Bill O'Reilly. I am not really like those people. But that's more or less how he portrayed me. And then he made it sound as if I had said that all during my Columbia career I had been unjustly put upon by left-liberals who were opposing their views on me, and I thought it was a terrible injustice. That's not how I felt at all. I didn't feel that way working with Alan Brinkley. So I actually wrote to Brinkley to say if you saw that article, I want you to know I didn't say anything approaching that, and that I always felt that you were a consummate professional. I just—doggone it. Some stinky undergrad has to go and screw up my, such as it is, relationship with Alan Brinkley. It's so annoying. Anyway, I was glad at least to be able to tell him I didn't say that, I am not a little Sean Hannity; you didn't produce that, thank goodness. And by the way, speaking of Sean Hannity, tell the Sean Hannity story before you go on.

RUSSELL: Well, Sean Hannity's show called me about 20 minutes ago and asked me to be on right now, and I said, I am sorry, I have something more important to do.

WOODS: (laughs) I can't get over that. First of all, that's really flattering, and I appreciate it, but on the other hand, I am dying to know: what did they want you to talk about?

RUSSELL: They just wanted five minutes of Sean yelling at me.

WOODS: Have you ever been on before?

RUSSELL: Yeah, I have been on a few times. He thinks I am a leftist of the traditional sort, and so tries to pigeonhole me there. And then when I come at him from all these different angles, he gets very confused.

WOODS: Yeah, well, that would—

RUSSELL: He starts yelling.

WOODS: That's why he treated Ron Paul the way he did, because Ron Paul didn't fit into the two categories you're allowed to occupy in the world, and these two categories are not nearly as far apart as Hannity thinks they are. Hillary Clinton? Really?

RUSSELL: Right, and that's what I've tried to tell him when I've been on his show, is that he shares a lot with progressives.

WOODS: Yeah, much more than he realizes. Absolutely.

RUSSELL: Oh, yeah, exactly.

WOODS: All right, let's turn to your book—*A Renegade History of the United States.* Right off the bat, when a person opens up this book, as you're introducing it to them, you are explaining how different this is from the traditional history book you're going to pick up about the United States. The traditional book is going to be a series of U.S. presidents, with the occasional sop to cultural history thrown in, maybe a little social history, but we all know that history is driven by great presidents. After all, they are looking down on us from the walls of our classrooms. They must be the driving force in history. You suggest that the real story has, well, let's say more texture to it.

RUSSELL: Yeah, I mean, you know well, I mean, history was originally the great men; until about the 1960s and 1970s that's all we had: the presidents, and the senators, and the generals, and the inventors. Then that was overturned by what was called the new social history—people who taught us in graduate school in Columbia who replaced those old men, in part, with a new class of people who they pretended were a representative of ordinary folks, and they tended to be labor leaders, and civil rights leaders, and suffragists, often radicals as well. And so where I started, and I was among them in that, but it seemed to me after a while that those people didn't really represent ordinary people either, and that looking around the world I lived in and looking at history more deeply it seemed obvious to me that to most people aren't Martin Luther King, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Dwight Eisenhower. They lived lives that are very different than those people, and also, more importantly, they shared cultural values that are often quite different and challenging to the dominant norm. So I looked below. I looked very far below. Like I said, I looked at history from the gutter up, and I looked at the people who were considered to be the scum of the earth, the lowest orders of society, people like prostitutes and drunks and criminals and gangsters and slaves and gays and lesbians, and I found that they, simply by behaving in ways they weren't supposed to behave, opened up many freedoms that

we all now take for granted. So just by being bad, they actually created a great good for all of us.

WOODS: I am interested in, for example, the way you deal with the subject of the civil rights movement, because as you say just now, the traditional way of telling it would be to focus on a few leaders and then maybe some passing glance at the fact that there was a mass movement going on, but we focus on a small number of people, and then we leave it there. But there's an interesting cauldron of activity that is seething beneath the surface here in your story.

RUSSELL: Yeah, one of the great untold stories, although it's now starting to be told a bit by historians, is that it wasn't the original story of the South in segregation is this sort of top-down, one-way violence. Right? There's racism from white racists and cops and mayors and Bull Connor down on the oppressed masses. Now, that certainly was happening all the time, but what I found was, and I am not the first to talk about this, but I am the first to talk about it in a sustained way, I think: it was really a civil war, and there was quite a bit of black armed and violent resistance against racists and cops and Bull Connor's forces across the South, and that actually created the conditions that gave rise to Connor's overreaction in 1963 and other overreactions by southern police forces during that period that created the news events and made those civil rights events into major news events and shamed the South and really led to desegregation. So that's my chapter on civil rights. I highlight that. There was a whole lot of violent resistance, sort of non-respectable resistance, but actually opposed by the civil rights leadership made their mission possible.

WOODS: You have a discussion in here about changing attitudes regarding consumption. For a long time, the moralizers were telling people that you shouldn't consume. You shouldn't enjoy yourself. This is all immoral. You should be happy living in your hut without any labor-saving devices and so on and so forth. Now, the traditional story would be, well, we had these great people, great organizational geniuses who came up with department stores and this and that, and there's no disputing that aspect of the story. But you can open all the department stores you want to, but if people's attitudes towards toward consumption haven't changed, no one is going to come in.

RUSSELL: This is a big story. This is one of those things that really moved me away from the left. I was infuriated by the constant denunciation of ordinary people's desires for things, this very elitist, haughty disdain of people and their desire for material pleasures and luxuries and leisure. You found that across and at Columbia where we were, but across the academic left, and I would say at the left and center you will find out it's very, very common. It's a very middle-class idea, ironically. It's a very bourgeois idea in fact. In the 19th century sort of rising bourgeois class began to say these things about ordinary people who went to Coney Island who went to the movies, who read dime novels, who drank whiskey at saloons. They were in a position of becoming a controlling managerial class. And so their mission was to control both the lower classes and the upper classes who indulged in these things, and so they came to embody sort of that very traditional, culturally conservative class that defines formal American

culture. What is most ironic is that the Left took up their mission. The Left are the people who speak in those ways—the ways in which the middle class moralists of the 19th century spoke. That it was actually a waste of one's time, or worse, degrading to spend one's own money how they please on things like pleasure, on things like going to the movies, on buying clothes that were nice, that felt good, that looked good, that celebrated the self. That's how the Left talks today. It's even worse than that. The Left has this theory, which has been disproved by many people, including Mises by the way, that advertisers control our minds, that we are helpless in the face of capitalists who tell us to want something, and we will automatically go buy it.

WOODS: Right, now, I am sure the capitalists wish that were the case. It would make it a lot easier to market new products. They don't even have to do any marketing research. Just come up with a good ad.

RUSSELL: My first response to that is: ask a capitalist if that's true. They're the first people to tell you that it's the most difficult thing in the world to figure out what we are willing to spend our money on, but that's certainly true if you look at the history of products that have come out of the factories, right? The vast majority of them have been turned down by ordinary people. It's even deeper than that. I am constantly in a fury against the Left, and that's where it really started with me. It was this really nasty, elitist, and ironically, very bourgeois and conservative idea that we shouldn't want things. We should be spending our time doing other stuff, which for them is, we should be managing society. We should be all managing our industries, and our cities, and our country, and perhaps the world government. It's a puritanical idea as well. It's the idea that the body, the pleasures of the body, belong to the devil. They are evil. They should be shunned and renounced in favor of the mind, of the spirit, of the intellect. So it's a profoundly conservative idea that I think animates much of left-wing discourse.

WOODS: Well, that's why I think a lot of these people have much more in common with a certain branch of conservatism than they realize as well. I am in contact with a lot of conservatives who themselves—they view consumerism—they call it consumerism, but what it really is is just people trying to live a comfortable life. You consider how horrible most people's lives were throughout most of recorded history. It's unimaginable to us. Now they are trying to eke out some modicum of comfort, and they are disparaged for this, and they don't understand what life is all about. And we get conservatives like Russell Kirk ,whom I deeply respect for a lot of things, and he was much better on foreign policy than any other conservative I know these days, but Russell Kirk—he called the car—the automobile—a mechanical Jacobin, because it uproots you from your traditional surroundings. You shouldn't be able to drive around and change your identity and this and that. Likewise, I see the same kind of contempt from the Left of people having their own little cars and being just selfish and consumed by their own lives, but that's how people—leave people alone, is my attitude, and I think that's probably the attitude of a lot of alienated leftists who don't know what happened to the Left.

RUSSELL: Absolutely, and so what you see is with the Industrial Revolution of the late 19th century came a consumer revolution, and the ways in which people lived was radically

transformed from the early 19th century to the late 19th century, people lived completely different lives—they had access to all sorts of things they had no access to before. Now, that for you and me and many of us is just a cause for celebration, plain and simple, but if you look at my chapter on the details of this, you look at this upsurge of plain hysteria about this, this is a terrible thing for many people. And it mostly was not actually people we would consider to be conservatives. It was actually mostly progressive intellectuals who came up with things like budgets for working-class folk that they tried to impose through state power, in fact—not always successfully, but they often at least promoted these budgets they put out there that were written by progressive intellectuals about how working-class people should spend their money—particular dollar amounts on things like going to the movies and reading books and clothes and food, and so a tremendous upsurge of discourse from progressive intellectuals from about the 1880s all the way through the 1920s about how terrible it was that ordinary people were spending their money on things to make them feel better. So this is, I think, still central in left-wing discourse. I think it still animates much of what they talk about.

WOODS: What I like about your telling of this is, the way this changed is that the people who were being lectured to got tired of being lectured to, and they just went ahead and made the decision to consume, to go to the stores, to buy things, to make their lives more comfortable. And you know, it's interesting: I had a historian on, an economist and historian, several months ago named Deidre McCloskey, and she has been interested for a long time in the question of how is it that in the Western world we saw for the first time sustained compound economic growth over a long period of time. What was it that made that possible? And the traditional textbook explanation is, well, international trade or protection for private property. She says the problem with these explanations is the Ottoman Empire had them—practically just all over the world they had those institutions, but they didn't get this explosion in growth. What was the change? And she says it was a change in the way people thought and spoke about the worthiness of merchant activity, of commerce, which had been frowned upon and looked down upon ever since ancient Greece and Rome. So, again, it's a change in attitudes on the part of the general public that makes this possible.

RUSSELL: Yes, absolutely. I completely agree with her. What I say in my chapter on this is it begins with desire. It began with desire. We would not be living the way in which we live now were it not for all of those people in the 19th century who simply wanted more. They simply wanted more, and they demonstrated that by going out and spending their money on those things to make their own lives better, materially better, against the moral prescriptions of these progressives and others. And so they're, as I say, among our greatest heroes. They should be considered among our greatest heroes.

And by the way, a lot of those heroes were young women in cities, and many of them were immigrants. In fact, poor women really drove much of the consumer revolution of the late 19th and early 20th century. Other historians have written about this, but they were very brave in particular because women in particular were not supposed to be going out into public and

spending money and sort of sexualizing themselves and wearing fancy clothes, and dressing what was called above their station, but they did it anyway. They did it against all the odds against all these moral prescriptions from these reformers. So those are the people who should be on our postage stamps.

WOODS: Well, the book we're talking about is *A Renegade History of the United States*. I am linking to it on the show notes page for this episode, TomWoods.com/321. Do you mind if I ask you, Thad, about the story that you've probably told more times than you'd care to, of your experience in academia? I have this sense that you got screwed somehow, and I have a feeling that's how you and I, even though we've never met in person, that's how you and I got to know each other. I think it had something to do with that, that I was kind of an outcast, and I had also been from Columbia, and I think you may have reached out to me during some of this. Can you recall any of that?

RUSSELL: Sure, yeah! It's a fairly long story, which I recounted in the Huffington Post several years ago.

WOODS: I'll link to that, too, on the page.

RUSSELL: I'm always happy to talk about it. I got very lucky: I got a full-time job at Barnard College across the street from Columbia, which is affiliated with Columbia, right after graduate school, but not tenure-track, and I had already gone through a political transformation at that point. I was definitely not any more part of the club. But people didn't really know that because I was—you're left alone to teach in the classroom, right? People don't come and monitor what you're saying. So I was developing these lectures, which ended up becoming *A Renegade History of the United States*, and giving them to these Columbia and Barnard undergraduates, and they liked it, and the classes grew tremendously and became very popular. I was there for five years, and toward the end of that a tenure-track position came open at Barnard in exactly the position I was teaching, and everyone said, oh, well, you're going to get it because you're a popular teacher, and the kids like you—but, of course, I had to give a job talk. I had to give a lecture on my work to the faculty. So I did that, and it was actually on the civil rights movement, that chapter. It ended up being a chapter. Half the faculty said it was great, and they loved it, and they thought it was a fantastic job talk, and half of them either walked out or wrote scathing emails about how I was inappropriate and had no place in the academy.

WOODS: Oh, my gosh!

RUSSELL: Yeah, so I was denied the job, and I was essentially fired, not technically, but I was essentially fired. And I have been an adjunct ever since. And they've also very studiously ignored my book. There has been no response to it at all—no reviews at all by academics or the Left generally. And I don't know what that means exactly. I don't know if they are aware of it and are doing this deliberately, or they just think it's unworthy of them. But I've sort of scraped together a career somewhat similar to yours, where I teach part time, and I write books and articles, and I do some public speaking.

But it's pretty clear that you're not allowed to have particular ideas, and you're certainly not allowed to take on the idols of the academic Left, like civil rights leaders and labor leaders and socialists and suffragists, the way I do. That really pissed off a lot of people, was my criticism of Martin Luther King for being essentially conservative. So it's a really terrible culture, academia. It's a really terrible culture that is committed to maintaining the status quo intellectually. There's no question about that. And they will do anything they can to get rid of people who challenge that. It's anti-intellectual, actually. I find it to be a profoundly anti-intellectual environment. It is simply the flip side of what academia was in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s when it was controlled by conservatives who blacklisted communists. I feel like we are essentially being blacklisted now. I think people who are libertarians or conservatives or whatever I am—or even a lot of leftists who don't toe the line—get run out of the academy. And it's a real problem, and it needs to be challenged, and I can't wait for higher education as we know it to be six feet under.

WOODS: Of course, you're preaching to the choir here. And your book is published by Free Press. It's not like you published it with Joe's Underground Publishing House. It's a major publisher. It's got endorsements that most people would kill to have. It's a serious and significant work. So the fact that they treat it that way is really all you need to know about the way these people are and how they want to hold on to their orthodoxies if it's the last thing they do.

RUSSELL: Right. I do think it's days are numbered. It's just a question of how many days those are. But I do think it will be replaced. I think technology is turning a lot of the higher education system now in all sorts of ways. And I think in 10 years it's going to dissolve, and I think the broader culture is starting to question the nostrums that we were given in graduate schools and undergraduate programs. So what needs to be said, most importantly, is that it's anti-intellectual. These people are not committed to open inquiry. They are not interested in challenging their own ideas. My ideas have changed radically over time. You probably know that I was born a socialist. I turned into a revolutionary socialist. I was a socialist well into my adulthood.

WOODS: I didn't know that. This would have been an even more interesting show if I had.

RUSSELL: Oh, yeah, I know. I was basically a commie into my 30s, and I have changed in many ways, as you can tell, and so what I now value more than anything is open inquiry. I value intellectualism. I value people who are open to new ideas. That's what I care about, because I am always changing my mind, and I think people should be open to that, and that's exactly what you don't find in colleges. It's exactly what you do not find in colleges in my experience. They are very interested in the diversity of colors, races, ethnicities, gender, sexualities as representations, but they are not interested in the diversity of ideas.

WOODS: Yeah, exactly, they'll have this kind of outward, external form of diversity as long as all those individuals are saying exactly the same thing. What is the point of that?

RUSSELL: Exactly, right. As I have often said, a person's race may be important, but what they have to say about race is much more important. And so the diversity of opinions about race and sexuality and gender to me I value much more than what those people are in terms of their identities—their stated identity. So yeah, it's a terrible environment. I really am very interested in doing basically what you're doing—online learning—all sorts of ways to disrupt this thing and to subvert it and create a new system and a new paradigm. I am very interested in doing it. I am not exactly sure what it's going to look like or how to do that, but I think that people like you and I should be spending our energies on that, on replacing higher education.

WOODS: Yeah, I am trying in my own small way with my different projects. I will probably put those at TomWoods.com/321 as well. To the extent that one person can, I am trying to say to people that if you want to get another perspective on things, you're not going to find it sitting in that classroom, but you can find it from the faculty that I've assembled with my different projects and so on. Before I let you go, I want to return briefly to *A Renegade History of the United States* just to say: another thing that I really like about it, that impresses me, is that chapter after chapter it's true that you're saying things that the standard left-liberal account tends to leave out, but on the other hand, you're saying things that a lot of undergraduates will find interesting, and a lot of honest people on the Left would find interesting, and then all of a sudden, you say, oh, by the way, the New Deal was like a cousin of fascism. What? So nobody is safe reading Thad Russell's book. There is no sacred cow that is not going to be attacked in this book.

RUSSELL: That's probably true.

WOODS: (laughs) But I thought that is so funny that he did that when probably the path of least resistance would have been to leave that chapter out altogether, because it doesn't help you from the point of view of the Left. But it is something that needs to be said. And I know there were some people of the handful of remaining real progressives at the time who were uncomfortable with the direction the New Deal was going, but they were basically steamrolled.

RUSSELL: Just the evidence is so overwhelming—the connections between European fascism and the New Deal is so overwhelming, and it is so important, and it's so overlooked. I couldn't help myself. I have had many people who think Roosevelt or thought Roosevelt was a wonderful man tell me they were amazed by it, but convinced by it. It was a very easy chapter. It was one of the easiest chapters to write because, as I said, it's just overwhelming. And by the way, a handful of leftish historians have done that work, but no one has really put it all together in one place the way I did, but it's been around. John Garrity and John Diggins—John Garrity wrote a very important article about this in the—

WOODS: Yeah, I read that.

RUSSELL: And John Diggins did as well. But no one really put it altogether in one place.

WOODS: All you have to do is read—what were your thoughts, by the way, when you heard that the *New Republic* magazine was having financial problems? Were you cheering, too?

RUSSELL: No, I said, and I said this on Twitter. I am very sad because they proved my argument consistently.

WOODS: (laughs) That's true.

RUSSELL: My argument there is that—and this is my next point—imperialism has always been the flip side of progressivism.

WOODS: Yeah, that's got to be told, yeah, and there's that classic William Leuchtenberg article on that, but there's so much more that can be written on this.

RUSSELL: Absolutely. Yeah, there's no question about it that imperialism, at least in this country, and probably in England, too, comes out of progressivism. The idea that—this moral imperative that we are obligated to uplift our social inferiors did not end at the ghettoes, right? If we are obligated to uplift the poor in the ghettoes, we should also be obligated to uplift the poor in Bangladesh and South Africa and across the world, right? And that's exactly what progressives said in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and that's why they supported the Spanish-American War and World War I and World War II, and the Korean War and the Vietnam War. This is exactly what led them into those places, was the idea that we should be our brothers' keepers.

WOODS: You know what's interesting, too, is that the Social Gospel clergy, whom you would think are following the Prince of Peace, were overwhelmingly in favor of World War I. Richard Gamble has a book called *The War for Righteousness* in which he goes through very systematically and unpacks the thought of the Social Gospel clergy, and they are entirely for the war. And not only are they just for the war, but they are assigning traditional Christian categories to the various participants. So, of course, the U.S. soldier is like another Christ, and the Germans are like the devil. It's like the neocons except they are supposed to be on the Left, but it goes to show that ultimately if the result is war, I don't care if you're a neocon or you're on the Left. You're wrong on the most important issue that really matters these days.

RUSSELL: Well, yeah. Our friend Anthony Gregory said to me once, "Neocons are just Neanderthal progressives." They are progressives who sort of do things in not a very sophisticated way, but they are the same ideology essentially, right? We must remake the world in our image, right? That's what drove progressives. And it wasn't just remaking the slums. It was remaking the entire world, and they were universally. This is the way not just the Social Gospel clergy talked about—the way they talked about these things. It was also Woodrow Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt. It was Franklin Roosevelt. It was Harry S. Truman. It was John F. Kennedy—every single one of those great, progressive presidents thought in those terms, and that's what led to the creation of the American empire. In my view, that's the principal cause of it.

WOODS: Is this just an idea in your head right now, or are you actually in the middle of writing this book?

RUSSELL: I am in the middle—I am dead in the middle—straight in the middle of writing a book about this, yes.

WOODS: Wow! I can't wait for that. That's going to be so important. And by the way, talk about a book that the Left is going to ignore. Can't acknowledge this book at all. I don't mean to pile on the Left because believe me, I spend a lot of time on this show talking about how screwy the people on the Right are, but just knowing your own background, it just seems right to really let them have it here.

RUSSELL: Yeah, that's part of the book the Left will hate very much, but the part they will hate very much is that I extend this argument about consumerism to international relations. So I tell a 100-year story of American popular culture being exported abroad through markets and how that has really caused the subversion of the authoritarian regimes from the Philippines in the 1900s to Nazis in the 1940s to the Soviet Union in the 1950s and '60s. And today in the Middle East, you'll see that that is what the imams are most concerned about, is cable news shows from American being piped through the satellite dishes on people's apartment buildings in Tehran and in Saudi Arabia. The diffusion of American popular culture is what will bring down the War on Terror, and that is what has caused tremendous freedom for people across the world despite American incursions through the military.

WOODS: Well, this is going to be so important. I can't wait to read it. The book we've been talking about today, of course, is *A Renegade History of the United States*. Thaddeus Russell, my guest—your website is ThaddeusRussell.com. I will link to that also at the clearing house for this whole episode, TomWoods.com/321. Thanks so much for being here, Thad.

RUSSELL: Hey, thank you.