

‘We Are Teaching the World’: The Decline and Fall of James Madison’s Vision of the Secular State in the USA

Robert Boston, senior adviser
Americans United for Separation of Church and State
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robboston85@gmail.com

James Madison is one of the most important figures in American history – especially when it comes to separation of church and state and secular government.

Many people, when they think of separation of religion and government in America, conjure up the image of Thomas Jefferson – and that is appropriate. Jefferson, after all, wrote the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which ended government support for the Anglican Church in Virginia and guaranteed freedom of worship for all. But we must remember that the Virginia Statute would have remained mere words on parchment had Madison not pushed it through the legislature and made it law in 1786.

Jefferson in 1802 spoke eloquently of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution creating a “wall of separation between church and state,” but it’s only due to Madison that we even have that First Amendment. Madison took the principles of the Virginia Statute – no official church and freedom of worship for all – and built them into the First Amendment. Madison was a primary author of the First Amendment and indeed the entire Constitution. In America, he is known as the “father of the Constitution.”

Madison knew that helping to birth the United States was a significant accomplishment, one that would stand as his legacy. While living in retirement, Madison corresponded with many friends and associates. In a letter dated July 10, 1822, to Edward Livingston, Madison observed, “We are teaching the World the great truth, that Governments do better without Kings & Nobles than with them. The merit will be doubled by the other lesson, that Religion flourishes in greater purity, without than with the aid of Government.”

The United States was still a relatively young country in 1822. Our Constitution had been in effect for only 33 years. Yet Madison did not hesitate to explain what we were teaching the world. Clearly, he believed

our way of doing things was worth exporting to other nations.

“We are teaching the world.” I often think about Madison’s words today. In Madison’s day, a brash young nation dared to tell the world that there should be no kings. It promoted the radical idea of distance between religion and government. That is what we taught the world.

What are we teaching the world today? Quite different things, I am afraid: That facts mean nothing and can be stretched like putty. That reality is what a would-be strongman says it is. That you need not believe evidence that you see with your own eyes – indeed, that we need not respect scientific evidence. That the powerful, the majority, assume more rights than others by mere dint of their numbers. That some Americans are less than.

We are gathered here today for an auspicious occasion: to celebrate the 120th anniversary of French secularism. While I extend my hearty congratulations on this milestone, I can’t help but note an irony: The United States, which pioneered the concept of secular government and exported it to other nations, is rapidly abandoning the principle.

Our situation is dire, and it is my sad duty today to inform you that you can no longer count on the United States to teach the world about the value of secular government. That lesson will have to come from other nations, such as France.

Our unfortunate situation can be laid at the feet of Donald Trump. When Trump was first elected in 2016, I thought it was a fluke. Under our convoluted system, Trump managed to win a victory in the Electoral College even though the majority of Americans did not vote for him. But in 2024, a majority did vote for him. They voted for him knowing full well that he has absolutely no respect for our democracy. They voted for him well aware that he had incited a mob to sack the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. They voted for him knowing that he is crass, intellectually stunted and lacking in anything like a discernable ethical center. They voted for him knowing that he is a sex offender.

The result is that our democracy is teetering. Tanks and armed soldiers prowl our major cities. People with the “wrong” skin color – that is, black or brown, are pulled off the streets by masked federal agents and sent to who knows where. Trump and his allies shut down entire sections of the federal

government. Neo-fascists openly scheme to rig elections and create plans to keep themselves in power for a generation. Trump's perceived enemies are charged with bogus crimes and hauled into court. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court sits on its hands and does nothing.

Two strands of fascism – and I do not hesitate to use that term – plague our nation. One is represented by a millionaire/billionaire class of plutocrats who resent paying taxes and believe our government should essentially do nothing but redirect resources upward to them. The other strain are the theocratic fascists who are busy working to make fundamentalist forms of Christianity the *de facto* official religion of the United States.

These two camps have made common cause to topple our democracy. The results of their handiwork are easy to see: Women have already lost the right to legal abortion in several states. The rights of members of the LGBTQ community, especially transgender Americans, are being steadily eroded. Discrimination against non-Christians and non-believers is now accepted culturally and legally in many cases. Books are being banned from public libraries, and several states are trying to force overtly religious displays, including giant posters featuring the Ten Commandments, into our public schools. Billions of dollars are siphoned from our public schools and turned over to private religious schools that have no accountability to the public that is forced to pay for them.

I have spent the past several months speaking in different parts of the United States, from Colorado and Texas to Iowa and Missouri. Everywhere I go, people ask me: What can we do? The problem is, there's no easy answer. The benefits of democracy and secular government would seem to be self-evident. But if people have rejected them for whatever reason, they will not be easily reestablished.

I'm not sure where my country is headed. I used to think our democratic norms and traditions were strong enough to withstand the challenges they currently face. I no longer believe that. Something must break. My hope is that whatever we in America go through does not involve massive amounts of violence and death – although we are already seeing some of that. I can only hope that what rises from the ashes points toward a better future.

Along those lines, I have put together some thoughts about what we in America need to do – assuming we survive this current period.

First, we need explicit references to the separation of religion and government and secular government in our Constitution, including the phrases “separation of church and state” and “secular government.” We also need a clear declaration that our laws must be based on secular rationales, something the Supreme Court used to accept but has recently abandoned.

Second, the United States needs a system of welfare and support for those in need that is provided by the state and not anchored in religious communities. Our aid to those in need must be provided by the state, and it must be secular.

Third, all taxpayer support for religious education must be terminated. Religious schools have the right to exist, but they have no right to force others to pay for their upkeep. Many religious schools teach incorrect views of science and history. Many preach bigotry and oppose basic rights for women, religious minorities and members of the LGBTQ community. Many oppose democracy. It is not in the state’s interest to prop up these institutions.

Fourth, our Constitution must contain explicit protections for reproductive freedom, including the right to legal abortion and ensure equal civil rights for members of the LGBTQ community, including the right to marry.

Fifth, all forms of what we in America call “civil religion” must end. This means ending the use of “In God We Trust” as our national motto, removing it from currency and deleting the phrase “under God” from the Pledge of Allegiance.

Sixth, politicians need to stop preaching. That’s not their job. During an event at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., in September, Trump asserted, “As president, I will always defend our nation’s glorious heritage, and we will protect the Judeo-Christian principles of our founding. We have to bring back religion in America – bring it back stronger than ever before.”

In a secular state, no politician should be tasked with “bringing back” religion. Individuals are quite capable of deciding for themselves the amount of religion they wish to have in their lives. When, if, where and how

we worship are none of the government's business.

Finally, we must challenge the idea, common in America, that religion deserves special treatment. Many religions preach intolerance; some even justify violence against those who believe differently. While the state must respect freedom of conscience, it does not have to remain silent when faith expressions labor to take away the rights of others or cause harm to specific individuals or larger society.

In America, we are learning the hard way what can happen when religious groups declare themselves above the law. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some houses of worship refused to respect commonsense regulations designed to protect everyone. When vaccinations became available, they embraced absurd conspiracy theories and fought life-saving public health measures.

Consider also the assault on our Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. If you watch footage of that event, you will notice an interesting thing: Many in the mob were waving crosses or hoisting Bibles. Their extreme religious beliefs led them to embrace violence and champion chaos. Presented with a ridiculous conspiracy theory – that the 2020 election had been stolen from Trump – they lacked the intellectual tools to process information and find their way to the truth.

This is, perhaps, the biggest challenge facing America right now: that a sizable number of our citizens lack sufficient intellectual ability to fend off nonsense. And many of these citizens are religious extremists.

Despite what these people may believe, reality has a way of asserting itself. In America, some people decided COVID was a myth propagated by the government for some nefarious purpose and that the virus was no worse than a head cold. Some of them believed this right up to the moment when COVID killed them.

Facts have become optional to too many Americans, and this has led us to a very dangerous place. I don't know where we will end up, and that scares me. But I do know that in the present moment, certain things can be discerned, and one of them is that it's accurate to say that the United States is no longer a country that respects the separation of church and state. We have indeed abandoned a principle that we pioneered. It was our

gift to the world, and we discarded it.

Despite my pessimism, I am hopeful for the future because I know some history, and I am aware that tyrants often do not rule forever. They inevitably fall.

Just four years before Madison wrote about teaching the world, Percy Bysshe Shelley penned the poem "Ozymandias," in which "a traveler from an antique land" recounts what he saw in a forgotten desert: A fallen monument – "two vast and trunkless legs of stone" – accompanied by a warning to all: "Look on my works, ye Mighty and despair."

Believe me, there are days when many of us in America look at the works of this current administration and can only feel despair.

But let us remember the context of Shelley's poem. The statue of the tyrant, who was so sure he would rule forever, is found, as Shelley tells us, half buried in sand in an obscure patch of land – "No thing beside remains," writes Shelley. "Round the decay/Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Tyrants fall. Their works, their grandiose monuments – and their lies – eventually tumble or are pulled down.

We are seeing some signs of that now in the United States. Trump's approval ratings are dismal and are only likely to get worse as Americans feel the brunt of his inept economic policies. Protests are erupting nationwide. Millions have joined them, me among them.

The metaphorical tearing down of the appalling edifice of shame built by the grifter sitting in the White House and his cronies will happen – it is just a matter of time. I do feel frustrated when I think that 38 years of my work were obliterated by a man of such low caliber and non-existent intellect. But then I remember two things: Number one, Trump didn't do it alone. He was backed by big money and powerful people a lot smarter than he is, people who want to fundamentally alter what my country is all about.

Number two, I remember that it is never a burden to defend an important constitutional principle like separation of church and state. Indeed, it is an honor; it is a privilege. I have been fortunate to do it for so long. There are

many less meaningful ways to spend a life.

And I want to be clear about one thing: During my journey, the support of friends like you in the international community has been invaluable, and I thank you for it. I have been with you many times here in Paris over the past 23 years. There were times when, after our meeting was over, I thought to myself, “Do I really have to go back?” But then I remembered that America isn’t the property of Donald Trump, the plutocrats or the religious extremists who have elevated him above the Jesus they claim to follow. America is an idea. A good idea. An idea worth fighting for.

Right now, a band of petty, mean-spirited and evil people have the idea of America in a death grip, and they hope to strangle the life out of it. The decent people of America will pry their hands loose. And once we do, we will begin the difficult task of rebuilding our democracy, including enshrining the secular state.

But as I speak to you today, acknowledging the reality we face in the USA, I have a job that is not pleasant but is necessary: Since the United States is abandoning its role as a supporter and defender of secular government, it’s important that other nations step up and assume this role. Those of you who represent countries where secular government is protected – and I’m especially looking at you, my French friends – must boldly and without apology stand up for the principles of the secular state. And what a great time to rededicate ourselves to that vital principle as we gather in this beautiful city to mark 120 years of French secularism.

You have your task. Now, my friends, please go forth and, in the spirit of James Madison, teach the world.