



What's in a Name?

Why Our Florida-Based Think Tank is Named for James Madison

William Mattox

America will celebrate its 250th birthday next July 4. With the founding spirit very much in the air, now seems like a good time to tackle a question people at The James Madison Institute (JMI) get asked a lot – but rarely have a chance to answer as fully as we'd like:

Why would a state-based think tank – in Tallahassee, Florida of all places! – be named for James Madison?

It's a good question – that's probably best broken down into three parts:

- Why Madison?
- Why a State (rather than a National) Organization?
- Why Florida (and not Virginia)?

Let's look at each of these one at a time.

Why Madison?

The answer to the first sub-question may seem obvious – but it's not quite as easy as one might think. I mean, James Madison hardly stands out among his peers ... if you're judging by appearances. Madison stood almost a foot shorter than his fellow Virginians, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. And he holds the dubious distinction of being our nation's SPOAT (Shortest President Of All Time).

Madison's opponents claimed he was barely 5'2." His supporters boasted he was all of 5'6." And most historians put his height at 5'4." By any of these measures, Madison is still the shortest in the Hall of Presidents. And he's also the LPOAT (Lightest President Of All Time). In fact, someone once said Madison would've needed to fill his hat with rocks to reach 100 pounds. So, he weighed in at barely half the weight of the average POTUS. And three men of Madison's size would still weigh less than one William Howard Taft (who tipped the scales at 350+ pounds during his time in the Oval Office).

Not only was Madison a lightweight, figuratively speaking, but he wasn't exactly the most impressive politician. Historians give Madison's presidency mostly "middling" grades – nowhere near the lowly James Buchanan (thankfully) but not in Mount Rushmore territory either.

Moreover, Madison had a curious habit of associating with some people now regarded as somewhat "sketchy." For example, Elbridge Gerry, the man who made "gerrymandering" infamous, served as Madison's running mate in the 1812 election. And the even-more-notorious Aaron

Burr introduced Madison, a longtime bachelor, to his future bride, Dolley.

It's a good thing Burr did. Madison's opponent in the 1808 presidential election, Charles Coatesworth Pinckney, said he could've easily beaten James in a head-to-head race. But Pinckney said he was no match for the one-two-punch of "Mr. and Mrs. Madison."

Dolley had a vivacious personality that perfectly complemented James' more reserved manner. But James came by his perspicacious nature honestly – and he cultivated it daily during a sickly childhood when he spent much of his time indoors reading and reading and reading some more.

In short, James Madison was the consummate nerd.

But, oh, what a nerd he was!

During the Constitutional Convention, Madison easily distinguished himself as the greatest political philosopher of the founding era. And he arguably possessed the most brilliant mind of the founders (although Jefferson and Ben Franklin could also stake a claim to that title).

Madison is justifiably celebrated as the Architect of the U.S. Constitution, the longest-running charter of its kind in world history. He is revered for masquerading as "Publius" in the Federalist Papers to encourage ratification of the Constitution (along with Broadway stage stealer, Alexander Hamilton). And Madison also gets props for penning the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution (which he initially considered superfluous – but added to placate George Mason, Patrick Henry, and other anti-Federalist critics).

So, it's easy to see why a public policy

think tank would want to take Madison's name. Just as it's easy to understand why 23 States have a city or county named for Madison. Interestingly it's not just states near Virginia, or among the original thirteen, that honor Madison in this way. Wisconsin's capital city is named for the fourth president. And Iowa's "Bridges of Madison County" are so famous, they made a Hollywood film by that same name.

Why a State (rather than a National) Organization?

The second sub-question is somewhat tougher than the first. Madison, after all, made his mark mostly on the national stage. He held many offices at the federal level -- including U.S. president, Secretary of State, Member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and Delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

A building near the U.S. Capitol is named for him. (Fittingly, it's part of the Library of Congress.) And a ceremonial seat inside the U.S. Capitol's House Chamber was set aside, after his death, for Dolley -- an extraordinary gesture given that women at that time had not yet earned the right to vote.

So, at first blush, it might seem that a think tank named for Madison would belong in Washington, D.C. -- not in a state capital.

But a careful reading of Madison's thoughts helps to explain why a state-focused organization like ours would be named for Mr. Madison.

Madison believed deeply in the importance of states. He perceived that the state

level of government is often best positioned to guard against dangers from on high (too much power vested in a distant national authority) as well as dangers from down low ("mob rule" at the local level that runs roughshod over minority interests).

Accordingly, Madison authored the Tenth Amendment, securing for the states all powers not enumerated in the Constitution for the federal government. And he warned against direct democracy, arguing for a democratic republic (or representative democracy) instead.

To be sure, Madison recognized there are certain functions best carried out by levels of government other than the states. Still, he not only believed in checks and balances in a horizontal sense (between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the federal government) but also in a vertical sense (with the states having a far larger sphere of responsibility than the national government).

Of all the many words Madison penned in his day, the most famous three are those that begin the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution: "We the people." But the next four words -- "of the United States" -- are more notable than they might seem. Our nation is the United *States* of America, not the United Counties of America or the United Cities of America. Moreover, we are not the National Republic of America or the Democratic Republic of America, but the United States of America.

States matter. Madison keenly understood this. So, naming a state think tank after Madison actually makes a lot of sense.

Why Florida (and not Virginia)?

The last sub-question almost seems ridiculous, on its face. I mean, Madison spent most of his life in Virginia. He was born there. He died there. He's buried there. Madison ran a plantation there. Madison represented Virginia at the Constitutional Convention – and in the U.S. House of Representatives.

So, Madison is a Virginian, through and through.

Nevertheless, if one were to insist on naming a think tank from another state after Madison, I suppose you could make a decent case for New Jersey (since he was educated there at what is now Princeton) or Pennsylvania (since Dolley was from Philadelphia, the city where Madison did his best work) or perhaps even Vermont (since its state capital, Montpelier, has the same name as Madison's plantation).

But Florida? Florida?

Surely you jest. (Or so it would seem from the raised eyebrows JMI staffers often elicit when we tell folks our think tank is based in Tallahassee.)

Yet, people who question why The James Madison Institute would be based in Florida fail to appreciate this: Florida is the “New Virginia.”

That's right, the Sunshine State now occupies the same position that Virginia held at our nation's founding. Florida is now the most influential “big state” in the country.

I see this all the time in my work in education. Florida consistently holds the #1 position in various K-12 state rankings for education freedom. The Sunshine State's university system has been ranked #1 for the last ten years running by U.S. News and

World Report. And Florida is increasingly viewed as a national leader in civics education – a fact that no doubt would please JMI's founder, Stan Marshall, who started our organization in 1987, during the bicentennial celebration for the U.S. Constitution.

Florida's leadership in many other areas of public policy can be seen as well. For example, we've become a national model for election integrity (consistently offering clear results on the night of an election, unlike some states that take days and sometimes weeks to count all votes). And Florida is a national leader in government efficiency. We have roughly the same population as New York, yet only half the state budget and half the state workforce as the Empire State.

So, Florida is the “New Virginia,” the most influential big state in America today. (And it really isn't even close – at least in my mind.)

Still, I'm sure our friends in the Lone Star State would like to claim this title. And those tall Texans would no doubt boast that just as Virginia produced more presidents (seven) than any other state during our nation's first 60 years, Texas has produced more presidents (three) than any other state during our last 60 years.

Now, if Texans really want to stand proudly behind LBJ, I suppose they can make that argument. And while I don't fault Lone Star loyalists for claiming Bush 41 or Bush 43, any fair-minded observer would have to admit that the GBOAT (Greatest Bush Of All Time) is the one who served as Governor of Florida – Jeb!

Moreover, the current occupant of the White House loves Florida so much that he wants to claim it as his home state (even

though he still acts like a New Yorker). And Trump has filled many key positions in his administration with Floridians – Pam Bondi, Marco Rubio, Susie Wiles, etc.

Of course, if Texans really want to get into a spitting match over state supremacy, it should be noted that in the most important comparison of them all, the state of Florida has brought home 11 college football national championships over the last half-century while the state of Texas has claimed a measly one.

So, no matter what the arena – classrooms, governing halls, playing fields – Florida shines brightly, like the “New Virginia.” Texas, conversely, seems more like the “Old Massachusetts,” a quaint second fiddle.

A Madisonian Spirit

Finally, it needs to be noted that Florida very much has a Madisonian Spirit. That is, much like James Madison, the Sunshine State is often underestimated or overlooked or taken lightly. And much like Dolley, Florida possesses a warm, convivial, sunshine-y outlook.

Indeed, Dolley’s White House parties were often called “squeezes” because they were so popular, guests had to “squeeze” in to join the fun. Similarly, Florida’s hospitable spirit and good governance have made our state so popular that Florida’s Welcome Centers should now greet newcomers with a glass of orange juice and this message, “You can squeeze in so long as you leave behind all of your former state’s bad ideas about governing.”

In sum, then, it’s easy to see why a state-based think tank in Tallahassee, Florida is named for James Madison: Madison was a great thinker; Madison believed in the power of the states; and Florida, the “New Virginia,” has a warm, hospitable Madisonian spirit!

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