What James Madison Might Say Every American Should Know **By Doug Smith, Guest Blogger**

*James Madison was the intellectual force behind the creation of the United States through the US Constitution. He spent his entire life exploring government and models of citizen empowerment in the hopes that people could shape their own destiny.* *What would he say every American should know? The Aspen Institute*[*Citizenship and American Identity Program’s*](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/citizenship)*"What Every American Should Know"*[*initiative*](http://www.whateveryamericanshouldknow.org/) *crowdsources ideas from a wide range of Americans into top 10 lists about what all Americans should know in order to be aware, effective, and engaged citizens. The goal of this project is to spark creative conversation about who we are as a nation today — and how we want to tell that story.* *Below,*[*Doug Smith*](https://www.montpelier.org/center/about/staff-directory)*, vice president of*[*The Montpelier Foundation*](https://www.montpelier.org/)*and director of the* [*Robert H. Smith Center for the Constitution*](https://www.montpelier.org/center)*, shares what he thinks Madison might recommend every American should know.*

**1. The US Constitution:** There’s a reason they called James Madison “Father of the Constitution.” No other individual did more to shape its creation, explain its viability, and defend its implementation. The Constitution is like the rulebook for political rights, but it’s the people’s to write and at times change. Madison said, “My idea of the sovereignty of the people is, [that the people can change the constitution if they please](https://books.google.com/books?id=gK9JAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA94&lpg=RA1-PA94&dq=%E2%80%9CMy+idea+of+the+sovereignty+of+the+people+is,+that+the+people+can%22&source=bl&ots=Y9HJMvoLJV&sig=RBkBKzgxE13gBy4C5aSfpgUktU4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiq3s2kqf3LAhWODBoKHeX9CCAQ6AEIMjAF#v=onepage&q=“My%20idea%20of%20the%20sovereignty%20of%20the%20people%20is%2C%20that%20the%20people%20can%22&f=false), but while the constitution exists, they must conform themselves to its dictates.”

**2. The Bill of Rights:** Madison originally argued that a bill of rights was “[unnecessary and dangerous](https://books.google.com/books?id=osbZAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA626&lpg=PA626&dq=%22As+to+a+solemn+declaration+of+our+essential+rights,+he+thought+it+unnecessary+and+dangerous%22&source=bl&ots=0VcoDmohXW&sig=zNyvI3U2dLBmxrQxmizX6dSP6hA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjIhpf7zoHMAhVJHD4KHdAtCf0Q6AEILjAF#v=onepage&q=%22As%20to%20a%20solemn%20declaration%20of%20our%20essential%20rights%2C%20he%20thought%20it%20unnecessary%20and%20dangerous%22&f=false)” for a constitution such as ours, but he changed his tune when he realized citizens needed the assurances it provided. The Bill of Rights is a kind of American creed, in the most secular sense, ensuring our central values are front and center.

**3. The Power of Your Vote:** There’s good news: the power of voting means we are our own rulers. The bad news: if the government is lousy, then it’s our fault. In order for self-government to work, the people must be informed and engaged

**4. Access to Education:**Madison, a rich, white, 18th-century male, had as great an education as any entitled gentleman of his day. Uniquely, he thought everyone else needed one, too. [He once said](http://founders.archives.gov/?q=%22prologue%20to%20a%20farce%22&s=1111311111&sa=&r=1&sr=): “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

**5. The Concept of Federalism:**The federal and state governments have their own political territory — their own sphere of influence — that each one protects. Madison envisioned this complicated arrangement for dividing power as the best possible way to protect the people’s liberties.

**6. How Checks and Balances Work:** We all know the separation of powers and different branches of government, but Madison knew that in order to maintain that separation, each branch needed to be given the power to check the other branches when they encroached on its territory.

**7. Factions in Government Are by Design:** Congress may seem dysfunctional because American politics is designed to be adversarial, but the alternatives are even worse. Tension means that political liberty and free thinking are thriving. As he put it: “Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to animal life, because it imparts to fire its destructive agency.”

**8. Justice Is the Purpose of Government:**The ultimate purpose of government is justice, and that’s not the same as, “Just Us.” The Constitution lists “Establish justice” as one of its goals in the Preamble. And in "Federalist No. 51," Madison wrote: “Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been and ever will be pursued until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit.”

**9. Freedom of Conscience:**Political philosophers prognosticated about religious “toleration.” In other words, the people’s right to practice their own religion would be *tolerated* by inquisitioners. Madison’s view was far more radical. He flipped the idea of toleration on its head. He believed that the people’s right to worship in their own unique way (or even their right not to worship at all) was first and foremost a "[gift of nature.](https://books.google.com/books?id=m5u9CQAAQBAJ&pg=PA47&lpg=PA47&dq=%22+If+we+recur+to+its+origin,+it+is+equally+the+gift+of+nature%22&source=bl&ots=whTRzrrR5V&sig=TOeg5gNVhL3xE_oBbv-JZpkl0Gg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiCk42e24HMAhXGzz4KHauyCgAQ6AEIOTAH#v=onepage&q=%22%20If%20we%20recur%20to%20its%20origin%2C%20it%20is%20equally%20the%20gift%20of%20nature%22&f=false)” Therefore, government should keep out of it.

**10. Freedom of the Press:** Madison believed the press were important guardians of truth and liberty. Yes, he knew that the newspapers were full of partisanship, slanders, and lies. But in spite of the press’ “abuses,” he believed that "[the world is indebted [to them]](http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendI_speechs24.html) for all the triumphs which have been gained by reason and humanity, over error and oppression.”

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