

Who Shall Remain Nameless: Al Hanzal and Democracy in Action  
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I grew up in the West End of Saint Paul, Minnesota in the 1940s and '50s. Back then, the West End—it was also called West 7th Street—was a solid, upstanding, church-going, white working-class community. All of us went to Monroe High School (named for James Monroe, the fifth U.S. president, 1817-1825), grades 9-12, on Palace Avenue, we could walk there. We were assigned to go to Monroe because we lived in the neighborhood, but we didn't think about it; Monroe was our school. Green and white, the school colors. The school teams were called the Green Wave. I still remember most of the Monroe fight song:

We love you dear old school of Monroe,  
We'll be true to you.  
And all the things that you do stand for,  
We will fight for you. (rah, rah, rah)  
We will aim for victory,  
In our every deed.

The last two lines of the song include “. . . Monroe, / Always in the lead.” but the whole of them is lost to memory.

I left the West End when I graduated from Monroe and enlisted in the army. I've lived for decades in the state of Vermont.

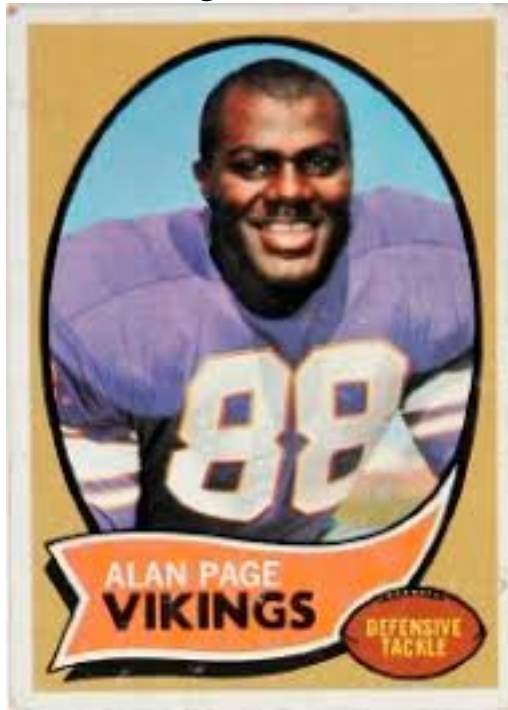


Monroe High School hasn't existed since 1977. In 2008, two schools merged to form Linwood Monroe Arts Plus: Monroe Community School, an elementary school, which was housed in the old Monroe High School building, and Linwood A+ Elementary in the Summit Hill area of the city, about a mile from the West End. Linwood-Monroe, as it is commonly called, with its two campuses a mile apart, is a pre-kindergarten-through-grade 8 (children aged three to thirteen) magnet school. A magnet school specializes in some academic area—in this case, the arts—and enrolls students from throughout the school district who choose to attend; it isn't a neighborhood school. Unlike the old Monroe High School, which was totally white, Linwood-Monroe is racially diverse: 30% white, 30% black, 25% Asian, primarily Hmong from Southeast Asia; and 15% Hispanic.

Last year, 2018, a Linwood-Monroe parent brought his concern about the Monroe part of the school's name to the school's Parent-Teacher Organization. James Monroe, he offered, isn't the kind of person the school ought to be named after. The PTO co-chair sided with the parent: "It's a critically important issue that James Monroe was a slave owner, and that doesn't reflect the kids that go to Linwood-Monroe in the slightest." The PTO membership agreed that the Monroe name should go, as did the school's principal, Bryan Bass, who incidentally, or not incidentally, is black,

and the school leadership team. (Linwood derives from the Old English word for lime tree.)

These days, name changes are getting to be common practice in the Twin Cities, Minneapolis and Saint Paul. The old (Daniel) Webster Elementary is now Barack and Michelle Obama Elementary. Patrick Henry High School's Principal Yusuf Abdullah is heading up a group looking into changing that school's name. I went swimming in Lake Calhoun (John C.). Now it's Lake Bde Maka Ska, a Dakota Indian name. Alexander Ramsey Elementary is no more. Ramsey was Minnesota's second governor from 1860 to 1863. In response to attacks by the Sioux Indian tribe in 1862 resulting in the deaths of 800 white settlers, Ramsey declared, "The Sioux Indians of Minnesota must be exterminated or driven forever beyond the borders of the state!" The school is now named Justice Alan Page Middle School after Minnesota's first black state supreme court justice. Page first gained renown as one of the "Purple People Eaters," a supremely talented defensive line of the Minnesota Vikings team in the National Football League.



Given the current trend, the Linwood-Monroe name change looked to me like a done deal. But not so fast. On to the scene

comes Al Hanzal, a 1960 Monroe High School graduate (I didn't know him back then) and former Assistant Commissioner of Human Services in Minnesota, who opposed the name change.



Excerpts from an email Al sent around:

Because the 5th President, of the United States, James Monroe, owned slaves, a small group wants the name [of Linwood Monroe Arts Plus] changed. This may have become a reality. Except, a group of Monroe alumni has risen up and said, "Wait a minute School Board, you are losing more than you are gaining with a name change."

The Monroe and West 7th Street community has a rich and strong tradition in the city of St. Paul. This blue-collar community traces our roots back to immigrant groups, from the Italians on the lower levee, to Germans, a vibrant Czech community, Irish and other nationalities. After World War II, with the baby-boomers, thousands graduated from Monroe and became part of the Monroe and West 7th Street tradition. . . .

Over these many years, community volunteerism from such programs as the West 7th Street Boys Club and the Monroe annual alumni meetings have sponsored programs and efforts to deal with those most in need in the community. Few other communities in St. Paul can boast of such community involvement. These efforts continue today.

Some have tried to paint this as a racial question. It is not. Those of us who went to Monroe never really ever knew of James Monroe's history. To us, it was always just "Monroe," our community school with its rich cultural tradition. [I thought it was MONroe, and so help me, it just now hit me why the yearbook was called the Doctrine.]

The Monroe Alumni are not just trying to preserve the past. We recognize the wonderful richness, tradition, and culture that is associated with the Monroe name. This thread, woven through time and by tradition, forms a strong fabric into which the Monroe school is deeply meshed. For generations, it has been the heart of our West End community. We desire nothing more than to see that thread continue weaving and growing in our community fabric. We openly welcome all new individuals, ideas and concepts to further that continued growth. Erasing history and tradition will do nothing to move the community forward.

In no time, Al got 700 Monroe alumni and West Enders to sign an online petition to keep the name. Full disclosure: I signed Al's petition, giving it little thought, I must admit.

Al put together a group that has variously called itself the Monroe Alumni, the Monroe Community, and the Monroe Steering Committee. I emailed Al, and he informed me that the group includes a pastor and business owner from the West 7th area, a former Monroe teacher, a community organizer, the president of the West 7th Street Boys Club, and several other Monroe alumni. Al and his group have been tireless in their opposition to the name change, sending out mass emails, which I as a petition-signer receive, holding and attending meetings, and corresponding with school board members. Their efforts have received local press coverage.

At this writing (June, 2019), the Linwood-Monroe name change hasn't gone through. The last mass email I received from Al, speaking for, in this instance, The Monroe Steering Committee, was on June 11th, 2019. I've done a lot of editing in the interest of

making it more concise, but I think I've captured the gist of Al's message:

The Monroe Community's yearlong effort to keep the Monroe name part of the West 7th Community comes down to one school board meeting! On Tuesday, June 18th, the Board will vote on whether to accept a new school name. We will attend the meeting and ask the Board to suspend its vote and reopen the school naming process in order to conform with its school-naming policy, which requires community and school alumni input in the process.

Under the direction of Dr. Bass, the school leadership has not followed board policy. While his letter to parents in May of 2018 promised to include community and alumni in meetings pertaining to this matter, he has not done so. Monroe Community repeatedly asked to be included in the process. We were told, "We do not need any input from old white racists." The administration at Linwood-Monroe Arts Plus has not only failed to adhere to policy, it has demonstrated disrespect for our history, traditions, and culture.

Therefore, we ask the School Board to hold off on any decision regarding the Monroe name change in order to allow for members of the community to be legitimately and respectfully included in the name-change process.

Please attend the St. Paul School Board meeting on Tuesday, June 18th, at 5:30, at [the address]. We need you there! Your presence can make a difference. If you have something green, wear it. Bring friends and family. Connect with old Monroe friends. Based on comments from several board members, we believe we have a chance to influence the process. This is democracy in action.

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It's early in the morning on a Friday, June 14th, four days from the school board's meeting, and I just finished breakfast and am drinking a cup of coffee. What are my thoughts about this name change business?

The first thing that comes to me is a question: What exactly is at stake for Al and his group with this Linwood-Monroe name change? It's not as if Linwood-Monroe is a community school like the old Monroe High School and Monroe Community School were. Linwood-Monroe is partly in the West End—one of its two campuses is in the Summit Hill area—but it's certainly not *of* the West End. It's a specialized pre-K/elementary school that draws students from throughout the Saint Paul school district--the entire city--who opt to go there; they aren't assigned to go there because they live in the neighborhood. The material Al put out talked about recognizing "the wonderful richness, tradition and culture associated with the Monroe name" and desiring to "see that thread continue weaving and growing in our community fabric." Linwood-Monroe does that, or could do that? Really?

Even more fundamentally, I ask myself, is Al and his group trying to continue a community and way of life that has been largely or completely displaced? I'm way out here in Vermont, 1,500 miles away, but when I read articles online from the Saint Paul newspaper like "A St. Paul Neighborhood Invaded by Guns, Drugs, and Swat Teams,"<sup>1</sup> it causes me to wonder.

The SWAT teams and the FBI and the police plugged up the 900 block on Palace Avenue [Monroe is at 810 Palace Avenue] on a Tuesday night in the spring in the city of Saint Paul, and then they started coming through Mike Barott's yard. They were on a fast pace with their rifles held shoulder-high as they streamed around Barott's grill and picnic table, through the trees and yard ornaments and then into the alley.

Enforcers from a Mexican drug cartel reportedly had been in the house just three doors from Barott and they had been

shaking down, violently, two teenagers whom the cartel suspected of stealing methamphetamine and as much as \$200,000 in cash.

I don't remember SWAT teams and Mexican drug cartels a block away from the high school in the old days.

Al says, "Some have tried to paint this as a racial question. It is not." I ask myself: Do Al's opponents know something that has gotten by Al, that this most certainly *is* a racial question, that these name changes are indeed racially motivated? Saint Paul's racial demographics have changed significantly in the half-century since Al's and my youth. It's too simple to say demographics is destiny, but often you can accurately predict what's going to happen somewhere by deducing from demographic data. Since 1990, the Asian and black population in Minnesota has tripled and the Hispanic population has quadrupled. In 1970, whites were 95% of the population of Saint Paul; now they are a bit less than 50%.

Some background:

Through the efforts of private organizations known as VOLAGs (VOLuntary AGENCY), Hmong people from Southeast Asia in large numbers settled in the Twin Cities. The 2010 census showed there were 66,000 Hmong in Minneapolis-St. Paul, making it the largest urban Hmong population in the world. It is the cultural and socio-political center of Hmong life in the United States.

VOLAGs also sponsored people from Somalia in East Africa to move to the Twin Cities. As of 2016, there were 74,000 Somalis in the area, making it the largest Somali diaspora in the United States. Somalis who came here assist other Somalis to come. When I was growing up, the U.S. Representative from Minnesota's Fifth District, Minneapolis, was Walter Judd and now it is Somali immigrant, Ilhan Omar.

Black and Hispanics simply came to the area when they chose to.

Whether or not they are properly enforced, the nation has immigration laws and restrictions. States and communities don't.



People in them have accepted the idea that anybody can come at any time and that who lives alongside of them and their families is none of their business. It's VOLAGs' and the migrators' business, not theirs.

One of the activities of Al's group was to circulate what it labeled Facts About President James Monroe to make the point that Monroe had a lot to recommend him and was more than just a slave owner:

- He was a combat veteran, wounded in the American Revolutionary war at the battle of Trenton.
- He served as a delegate to the Continental Congress and Declaration of Independence. While he was not a strong proponent of slavery, he knew it could not be abolished at the time of the Declaration of Independence because southern states would have left the fragile union of states.
- As a diplomat to France, he helped secure the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 that opened up vast territories for American expansion, including Minnesota.
- He was the author behind the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 that forbid European countries from establishing colonies on United States soil.
- Monroe supported the founding of colonies in Africa for freed slaves. This eventually led to the formation of the nation of Liberia, whose capital, Monrovia, is named after our fifth President.

But the issue on the table isn't whether Monroe was a laudable political figure. The issue is whether a school ought to be named for someone who enslaved black people. If you are going to argue for keeping the Monroe name, you need to take on this question.

And don't ask me to do it. If I were black, I'd rather go to Barack and Michelle Obama Elementary than Webster Elementary. If I were a black parent of children at Linwood-Monroe, I wouldn't want them going to a school named after somebody who bought and sold my ancestors. It's hit me that I jumped too quickly to sign Al's petition. This issue has more than one arguable side to it.

It's not that the Linwood-Monroe name changers haven't thought it through and that with more information about the good white folks on West 7th Street and President James Monroe's virtues they'll see the light. They've very much seen *their* light, it shines bright to them, and that's to get free and clear of racist white America.

An article I wrote almost three years ago comes to mind in which I wrote, "The answer to the current state of black-white relations for white people in our time? Exit."<sup>2</sup> I still hold to it as a basic orientation: Back off. Quit trying to work anything out around race. Relate to you own and let the rest of them go their own way. I personally have no energy to give to this name change issue. What I'd be up for if I had children at Linwood-Monroe or whatever the school will be called, is checking out what's going on in the school, and if it's the anti-white, anti-American indoctrination that I suspect is going on, getting them out of the school. And I'd be up for giving serious consideration to getting out of Saint Paul, moving some other place in Minnesota or to North or South Dakota. Sometimes in life, you just need to get away from the poison.

I made a second cup of morning coffee and decided to write an email to the only Monroe classmate I've stayed in touch with over the years. I know he's big on opposing the Linwood-Monroe name change and I felt the impulse to let him know what I've been thinking about this morning. The email I wrote included this:

If I were at the school board meeting coming up, I'd be urging them to get Monroe off the school name as fast as possible. As far as I'm concerned, name the school for Al Sharpton, anybody. Let Monroe High School exist in history for what it was, God bless it.

I've decided not to send the message. I anticipate the non-response it seems I always get to anything I express that doesn't square with people's take on things and I don't want to go through it with my old school buddy: "Thanks for sharing your thoughts.

We're seeing how many people we can get to the school board meeting on the 18th. We've got to get the board to postpone the vote."

It looks to me that given the currently accepted gospel preached by the media and universities and then sermonized in the lower level schools—American history is a chronicle of white racial injustice--plus the demographic changes over the last few decades, it's not going to make any difference what Al and his people say at the board meeting; the Monroe name change is going to pass. Al writes in a mass email, "Based on comments from several board members, we believe we have a chance to influence the process." "Democracy in action," he says. In email correspondence with me, he asserted, "We're not Don Quixote fighting windmills, nor are we politically naïve about bucking the current flavor of political correctness. I find it important to fight for principles like the rule of law, strengthening local schools, and wisely spending money." Al has pointed out that a name change would cost \$50,000. The name-change committee that's been set up says it will be \$12,000.

We'll see what happens on the 18th, but I'll be very surprised if Al's side wins the day. Democracy in action, Al's term, includes the reality that you greatly increase your chances of winning the vote if you can get your case on the moral high ground (being against slavery beats fighting for the rule of law, strengthening local schools, and wisely spending money); are in a position of power and influence (being Linwood-Monroe's PTO chair or principal beats the slot Al, who provides marketing advice, occupies in the scheme of things); and if you are more disregarding of your opponent than he is of you (Al's side are old white racists beats Dr. Bass didn't meet with us like he said he would). What makes this complicated for me is that now that I've thought about it, I can't honestly say I think a name change from Monroe would be a bad idea.

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It's June 16th, two days before the school board meeting. Today's newspaper reports that a proposal to rename the school Global Arts Plus will be presented for the School Board's approval at its meeting on the 18th.<sup>3</sup> I noted that the name of the new school denotes a global, rather than local, state, or national identity. In my day, we wouldn't have named something "Global." The article reports Linwood-Monroe's PTO co-chair Jason Johnson as saying that district councils in neighborhoods surrounding the school were notified of the desire for a name change, and that one of them sponsored a community meeting and mediation session on the issue last summer. "To reopen the process simply because an outside group was heard but didn't get the outcome they hoped for," says Johnson, "is a disservice to the students, parents, and staff that have chosen a name that honors the values and aspirations of the school as it is today, with its eye on tomorrow." Of course, this doesn't square with Al's depiction of what's gone on. I assume this discrepancy will come up at the board meeting. The article notes that this is the first time in the Twin Cities that the removal of a U.S. president's name from a school has been proposed.

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It's June 17th, a mass email from Al:

This is a reminder to attend the School Board meeting on June 18th 5:30 when the School Board will decide on a new proposed name change for Monroe School. It's important for us to have a large turn out from the Monroe community. We will be presenting our reasons for the Board to postpone any decision on the name change and reopen the process to obtain real community involvement in the decision. Bodies speak louder than words. Wear something green if you have it. The public comment process starts at 5:30 at the Saint Paul School Administration Building, located at 360 Colborne Street, Saint Paul, MN 55102. Come early and have some fun.

Monroe School? When has it ever been called that? And do bodies really speak louder than words? What will a group of white people, most all of them over sixty, dressed in green for a school that closed its doors 42 years ago, “speak”? And will it be louder than the words of the black student who is certain to be called upon to plead with the Board, “Please don’t make me go to a school named for someone who made slaves of people like me.” And really Al, this is a time to have some fun?

One day to go before the school board meeting.

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June 19th. The decision is in, James Monroe shall remain nameless from now on. An article in the morning newspaper: “St. Paul School Board Renames School that Honored Slave-Owning President--Linwood Monroe Arts Plus Now to be Known as Global Arts Plus.”<sup>4</sup>

The St. Paul school board voted 6-1 Tuesday night to strip the name of a slave-owning U.S. president from one of its schools, overriding the vocal objections of some of the school’s alumni.

Linwood Monroe Arts Plus, a dual-campus school that decades ago was home to the former Monroe High, named in honor of President James Monroe, now will be known as Global Arts Plus.

Red-clad proponents pushed for the change to better reflect the school’s arts-infused focus and diversity. Students come from all over St. Paul and all over the world, said Saray Garnett-Hochuli, the school’s PTO co-chairwoman.

Linwood Monroe’s upper grades now are housed at the former Monroe High, and that school’s active alumni—the last class graduated in 1977—brought a smattering of green colors—emblematic of the “Green Wave” of old—to the boardroom to fight the change.



In the end, Board Member John Brodrick was the lone member to side with opponents. Erasing the name of a U.S. president is new to Twin Cities name-changing conversations, and Brodrick, reflecting aloud, described it as a significant and important moment that should not be rushed.

Board Member Steve Marchese, however, said it was time to think of the young people carving out a new future. “We respect our history, but we are not bound to it,” he said.

Critics of the name change said school officials failed to follow board policy requiring broader alumni and community input in name-changing decisions. A year ago, when the issue first arose, more than 700 people signed a petition to keep the Monroe name a part of the West 7th Street community, Al Hanzal, a 1960 graduate, noted before the meeting. Dave Bredemus, a 31-year employee of the district who worked 25 years at Monroe, opposed the change. He said that he met with supporters of the change and saw no willingness to compromise. He said that while the name could be described as a product of the “school community,” it was not the work of the community at large. “It is so important to be involved with the community around the school,” he said.

Supporters of the change wanted to erase Monroe’s name

and better reflect the school's current mission. Global Arts Plus was chosen from among three options that also included Saint Paul Community Arts Plus and Linwood West 7th Arts Plus—taking 36% of the vote by students, parents and staff members.

Tuesday's vote directs the administration to work with alumni and the West End community to explore a way to honor the Monroe name, but not necessarily James Monroe. Many people in the neighborhood know the name simply as Monroe.

On the budget front, the district had been eyeing a potential fifth consecutive budget deficit before being rescued by Gov. Tim Walz and state legislators. Marie Schrul, the district's chief financial officer, said a late infusion of state money for voluntary preschool programming helped balance a general fund budget that also included \$17.3 million in new voter-approved funding. The district is investing in its middle schools and in new teacher coaches who Superintendent Joe Gothard said are needed to bring more structure to efforts to improve school climate and make classes more relevant to students of diverse backgrounds.

Al says 75 of his people showed up at the meeting and that his side got eight minutes to make their case and the other side got 45. The vote on the name to propose must have been close if the winner of three received 36% of the total vote. I suspect there is a connection between eyeing the fifth consecutive school budget deficit despite a \$17.3 million increase in local taxpayer support until the infusion of state funding saved the day and the need for "investing" to improve school climate and make classes more relevant to students from diverse backgrounds. A school climate issue? Nothing like that in the old days at Monroe. Somebody is paying the cost for what's going on and it's not the VOLAGs.

Here I am again drinking my morning coffee, this time asking myself, what does this episode imply for the concerns of this publication--white identity, interests, and culture--and for me personally? A lot of things come to mind, but I think it best to turn it back to you. What's your best thinking on any or all of this?

## Endnotes

1. <https://www.twincities.com/2014/05/09/joe-soucheray-a-st-paul-neighborhood-invaded-by-guns-drugs-and-swat-teams/>
2. Robert S. Griffin, "Blacks as Emotional Abusers of Whites: The Exploration of a Possibility," *The Occidental Observer*, posted on August 4th, 2016.
3. <http://www.startribune.com/monroe-high-alumni-fight-the-proposed-renaming-of-st-paul-s-linwood-monroe-arts-plus/511355101/>
4. <http://www.startribune.com/st-paul-school-board-to-hear-school-name-change-proposal-tonight/511465172/>