



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on June 23, 2023

Convention of States Using Quotes Out of Context to Confuse Conservatives

The men of the greatest purity of intention may be made instruments of despotism in the hands of the artful and designing. — Centinel I, Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer, 5 October 1787



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Under normal circumstances, I would be inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to someone quoting the Founding Fathers out of context, or contorting the meaning of the quotation so much that it is impossible to tell what the original speaker of the quotation had in mind. I assume, normally, that the person committing that error is either trusting some earlier writer who himself misquoted or misappropriated the words of a Founding Father, or is relying on his memory of the quotation and his memory failed him.

When it comes to an organization, however, that spends millions of dollars to convince conservatives that the only way to rein in Washington, D.C., is by calling for a convention of states, I judge such misquoting and misappropriation to be purposeful. This is especially true when that organization counts many historians and scholars among its members.

In [a blog post](#) published by the Convention of States (COS), the use of quotations of the Founding Fathers as proof that they “unanimously” supported such a convention as that being urged by COS can be nothing less than negligent.

This latest COS post not only distorts the Founding Fathers’ words, their context, and their obvious meaning, but it does so with a treacly tone that is cringe-worthy. In this example, the author refers to Abraham Lincoln, whom he cites as a supporter of a convention of states:

Imagine the humbling gravitas of feeling, in that moment, that I stood in the shadow of my hero, carrying out his work! I knew that if we told him about our modern endeavor to call an Article V convention, he would most assuredly rejoice.

I’ll not comment any further on this puffery. The reader is warned, though, that the post is chock full of it.

Now, on to the meat of the matter: the intentional misuse of the words of the Founding Fathers to serve the goals of the COS.



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One of the tactics most frequently employed by COS and others who seek the same goal is to include quotations of the Founding Fathers (or Abraham Lincoln, in the case of this latest post) wherein they are praising the provision of the U.S. Constitution that allows that document to be amended.

Then, COS takes that quote, couches it within their own emotional appeal for an amendments convention (or whatever name they give it in the particular article), and concludes by saying, “See? The Founding Fathers agree with us!”

There are many errors in such a statement, but I’ll confine my criticism in this article to the use by the Founding Fathers and misuse by COS of the phrase “a convention for proposing amendments,” or a similar description of that concept.

I have worked and written to oppose the convention proposed by COS for many years, and I have never once heard anyone on this side of the issue claim that the Constitution should never be amended or that the Founding Fathers opposed amending the Constitution. Not once. Never.

But you wouldn’t know that by reading COS literature. They try to convince conservatives that groups that oppose the COS’s amendments convention must also oppose the Founding Fathers, because if the Founding Fathers opposed the calling of a convention by the states then they wouldn’t have included Article V in the Constitution.

Allow me to use one quotation from this latest COS article as an example of the egregious mangling of the meaning of the Founding Fathers’ words. Quoting from his Farewell Address, the COS piece includes the following statement from George Washington:

If in the opinion of the people, the distribution or modification of the constitutional powers be in any particular wrong, let it be corrected by an amendment in the way which the Constitution designates.

Now, I have absolutely no problem with that counsel. If the Constitution needs to be modified in any way, then Article V sets forth the process for making such a modification. It seems pretty clear that that’s the method Washington is supporting.

But after that quotation, COS adds the following: “which, of course, includes an Article V convention.”

Well, that’s true. The method for amending the Constitution is laid out in Article V, and Article V calls for a convention as part of that process. But does Article V only allow a convention of states as COS implies? As they imply that George Washington was calling for? Absolutely not.

Article V provides two paths to amend the Constitution. The first is for Congress to initiate the calling of a convention “for amendments,” and the second is for two-thirds of the state legislatures to call for such a convention. No true friend of the Constitution would block either of these paths. That is not the issue.

The issue is that, even if we assume that Washington (or any of the other members of the Founding Generation quoted by COS) was speaking only of the second path, there are dangers lurking along *both* paths, highwaymen who would rob us of our liberties and leave the Constitution so amended that it would in no way resemble the revered document handed down to us by our Founding Fathers.

What is that danger? That danger is that, although we had men like George Washington and James Madison and Benjamin Franklin taking part in drafting the document that came out of the Convention of 1787, we would not have such men there today.



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In order to describe those dangers I will use the words of two Founding Fathers who were quoted in the COS blog post: Alexander Hamilton and George Washington. In the case of Hamilton, I will include a quotation from the very same essay — *The Federalist* No. 85 — that the author of the COS article used to support that organization’s scheme. First, though, General Washington:

Some respectable characters have wished that the States, after having pointed out whatever alterations and amendments may be judged necessary, would appoint another federal Co[n]vention to modify it upon these documents. For myself I have wondered that sensible men should not see the impracticability of the scheme. The members would go fortified with such Instructions that nothing but discordant ideas could prevail.” ([Letter to the Marquis de Lafayette, February 7, 1788](#))

Who do you think would be giving instructions to the delegates at the new convention? Soros? Gates? Bezos?

Finally, here is Hamilton from *The Federalist* No. 85. Incidentally, I invite all readers of this article to go and read [this document](#) in its entirety and see if you believe Hamilton is calling for a convention of states such as that longed for by COS. Hamilton writes:

I answer in the next place, that I should esteem it the extreme of imprudence to prolong the precarious state of our national affairs, and to expose the Union to the jeopardy of successive experiments, in the chimerical pursuit of a perfect plan. I never expect to see a perfect work from imperfect man. The result of the deliberations of all collective bodies must necessarily be a compound, as well of the errors and prejudices, as of the good sense and wisdom, of the individuals of whom they are composed. The compacts which are to embrace thirteen distinct States in a common bond of amity and union, must as necessarily be a compromise of as many dissimilar interests and inclinations. How can perfection spring from such materials?

And later in that letter, speaking of an Anti-Federalist pamphlet calling for a new convention, Hamilton writes that that pamphlet failed to address

the utter improbability of assembling a new convention, under circumstances in any degree so favorable to a happy issue, as those in which the late convention met, deliberated, and concluded.

That is the issue, dear reader. Not that amendments should be impossible or that Article V doesn’t include a path by which the states may call for amendments.

The issue is as George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just explained: Do you trust the virtue, knowledge, wisdom, and love of liberty of the people who would exert their influence to secure a seat at this new convention?



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