



The Mount Vernon Statement

by John Hendrickson

Recently leaders from both the Conservative and libertarian movements gathered at George Washington's home to issue and sign the Mount Vernon Statement — a document that is rooted in constitutional principles and rededicates the conservative movement back to constitutional government. The Mount Vernon Statement comes during a time when the conservative movement is currently divided with no clear leader in the form of Ronald Reagan or William F. Buckley, Jr., and when constitutional government is under siege by a new wave of radical progressivism led by President Barack Obama and Democrat leaders of Congress.

The Conservative and Libertarian movements have always had internal debates over fundamental policy and philosophical principles. Lee Edwards, one of the leading historians of the American conservative movement, wrote that “their [conservatives'] disputes are passionate and often personal precisely because they revolve around the most important thing in politics — ideas.”¹ The Mount Vernon Statement is an attempt to unify the conservative movement by fusionism — the idea of tying together the main strands of conservatism which include economic, social, and national security conservatives. A recent example of a fusionist conservative was President Ronald Reagan who unified the movement by his commitment to limited government, protection of life, and a strong national defense.

The history of the conservative movement is rich in ideas and that remains so even today. In the aftermath of World War II, the conservative intellectual movement sprang forth with the writings of Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver, F.A. Hayek, James Burnham, and the godfather of the movement, William F. Buckley, who founded *National Review* and organized the intellectual conservative movement. The conservative movement also had the influence of major political leaders such as Senator Robert A. Taft, Senator Barry M. Goldwater, and Ronald Reagan. In addition, conservatives also founded their journals, organizations, and think tanks such as the Hoover Institution, American Enterprise Institute, The Heritage Foundation, and CATO Institute and many state level policy organizations such as Public Interest Institute.

In September 1960, with the leadership of William F. Buckley, Jr., conservatives issued The Sharon Statement which listed key philosophical principles of conservatism. The Sharon Statement was a defense and commitment to constitutional government, a free-enterprise economy, and it called for victory in the Cold War. The Mount Vernon Statement follows the same direction as the Sharon statement and calls for conservatives to “recommit ourselves to the ideas of the American Founding.”² Specifically the Mount Vernon Statement proclaims:

Through the Constitution, the Founders created an enduring framework of limited government based on the rule of law. They sought to secure national independence, provide for economic opportunity, establish religious liberty and maintain a flourishing society of republican self-government... Each one of these ideas is presently under sustained attack. In recent decades, America's principles have been undermined and redefined in our culture, universities, and our politics. The self-evident truths of 1776 have been supplanted by the notion that no such truths exist. The federal government today ignores the limits of the Constitution, which is increasingly dismissed as obsolete or irrelevant.³

In addition, the Mount Vernon Statement calls for conservatives to adopt policies that are consistent with constitutional principles. Some of these principles include:

- applies the principle of limited government based on the rule of law to every proposal;
- honors the central place of individual liberty in American politics and life;
- encourages free enterprise, the individual entrepreneur, and economic reforms grounded in market solutions;
- informs conservatism's firm defense of family, neighborhood, community, and faith.⁴

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Conservatives must meet two key challenges in the battle of ideas with progressivism and modern liberalism. Conservatives must not only continue to fight for constitutional principles through education, but also offer sound public policy solutions. Representative Paul Ryan (R-WI) is an example of a conservative who has offered an economic reform plan — A Roadmap for America’s Future — that addresses entitlement, tax, and spending reform based on constitutional principles. Senator Jim Bunning (R-KY), who stood on principal in regard to government spending, Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK), and Senator Jim DeMint (R-SC), among others, are examples of conservatives who are pushing for public policy solutions based upon principles of constitutional government.

In addition to offering sound public policy solutions, conservatives must also continue to push for a renewed understanding and reverence for the Constitution, that is, conservatives must push for reform in civic education. “It is of first importance that the study of the Constitution should be an essential part of education of the American youth,” wrote Calvin Coolidge.⁵ Coolidge argued that citizens “should all have some idea of our fundamental institutions. We need to know their relationship to our daily life, the reasons for their existence, and benefits we derive from them and the necessity to ourselves for their perpetuation.”⁶ More recently the Intercollegiate Studies Institute has produced multiple studies that demonstrate an alarming ignorance among students and adults in regard to their knowledge of the Constitution, history, economics, and government.

The Mount Vernon Statement should be taken seriously by all conservatives and libertarians as a need to recommit to constitutional limited government. Just as past heroes of the conservative movement stood for constitutional principles against New Deal and Great Society liberalism, conservatives today must “stand athwart history yelling stop” to the policy idea of change and the progressive idea of reforming America’s institutions as advocated by so many of the Democrat policies. *The Washington Times* recently reported that because of the recession more people are dependent on the federal government for their daily bread.⁷ In this current economic recession and the financial crisis fueled in large part by even more government spending, debt, and deficits, conservatives must rally for an agenda that returns to constitutional principles and restores constitutional limited government based on economic liberty that reverses government dependency and encourages private sector growth.

James M. Beck, who served as Solicitor General in President Warren G. Harding’s administration and was a constitutional scholar, offered a solemn warning that Americans must be watchful that they do not fall to the same fate as the Roman Republic. In the 1930s during the New Deal, Professor Beck wrote that “instead of relying upon themselves,” people “are beginning to look to the central government to be fed and amused.”⁸ “We can only hope and pray that the American Republic...will yet escape the fate of Rome,” wrote Beck.⁹ Fortunately the prescription can be found in returning toward constitutional limited government and free-market principles. Conservatives must adhere to and fight for constitutional principles, and conservatives must look to history and apply the truths of the American Founding to the policy problems of today.

Endnotes:

¹Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Consensus: Frank Meyer, Barry Goldwater, and the Politics of Fusionism*, First Principles, No. 8, The Heritage Foundation, 2007.

²*The Mount Vernon Statement: Constitutional Conservatism, a Statement for the 21st Century*, <<http://www.the-mountvernonstatement.com>> (March 8, 2010).

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵James M. Beck, *The Constitution of the United States: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow?* With Forward by Calvin Coolidge, George H. Doran Company, New York, 1924, p. 5.

⁶Ibid., p.5-6.

⁷Patrice Hill, “American reliance on government at all-time high,” *The Washington Times*, Monday, March 1, 2010, <<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/mar/01/americans-reliance-on-government-at-all-time-high.com>>(March 1, 2010).

⁸James M. Beck, *Our Wunderland of Bureaucracy: A Study of the Growth of Bureaucracy in the Federal Government, and its Destructive effect Upon the Constitution*, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1933,p. 270.

⁹Ibid.

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