



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on January 24, 2011

Mont. Constitutional Seminar Draws Democrats' Ire

"The Making of America Constitutional Seminar" — a Montana constitutional seminar presented by the nonprofit organization National Center for Constitutional Studies — has provoked the ire of Montana Democrats this week. At issue for the critics was the group's charging an admission fee for entrance, as well as the use of the seminar to raise money. Although those issues have since been addressed, opposition to the seminar remains.



Since the complaints, Montana Republicans have agreed not to charge an admission fee. Likewise, in response to another objection voiced by the Democrats, they have moved the seminar from the House chambers to another room in the Capitol building.

Despite the changes, Democrats remain concerned about the seminar being held anywhere at the Capitol building (photo, left). Travis McAdam, executive director at the Montana Human Rights Network, contends that holding the seminar there may lead others to believe it is "a state government-linked event." He adds,

If this was a progressive group and we were trying to charge people to go into the House chambers, I can imagine the outcry about that. It speaks to me of this idea that you have conservatives say all the time that government should not be used to promote progressive issues, but it's OK to if you're having something that is about essentially being able to rewrite history and say it's theocratic and charge admission and pocket the profits.

The *Billings Gazette* reports,

Democratic legislative leaders said the group shouldn't be allowed to use the House chambers or use the event to raise money. Organizers of the event had been seeking individuals and groups as sponsors for \$100 apiece and for those willing to "adopt a legislator" for \$35 each.

Senate Minority Leader Carol Williams (D-Missoula) was angered when she learned that tickets were being sold for the seminar and that merchandise was going to be sold in the Capitol rotunda as a means to raise funds. "I'm really outraged about them trying to use the Capitol this way," she declared.

Senate President Jim Peterson (R-Butte) agrees with Williams, asserting that a fee should not be charged for entrance. He adds, however, that while the center's sponsors were informed that they could not charge a fee for entrance, legislative leaders have no control over what takes place in the rotunda.

Criticism over the seminar has not been limited to its costs and fundraising. The *Gazette* continues,

Others are questioning the political point of the National Center for Constitutional Studies, which says on its website that it advocates an interpretation of the U.S. Constitution that it believes



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“accords with original intent.”

McAdam indicates that his group has served as a watchdog over the National Center for Constitutional Studies in the past. He observes of the presentation,

When we’ve seen them come through the state before, mostly it’s just that [they say], “This is the history you weren’t taught in school: This is the real American history. The founders wanted this to be a Christian nation; you need to oppose abortion and oppose gay rights.”

Also commenting on the presentation, Rob Natelson, former University of Montana constitutional law professor, observes, “It’s certainly a different interpretation [of the Constitution] than would come from the U.S. Supreme Court, and I don’t always agree with their interpretations myself. On the other hand, the U.S. Supreme Court has often given interpretations different from what the founders had intended. I think that this group favors interpretations closer to what the founders would have intended.”

Organizers Susan Smith, wife of Representative Cary Smith, and Peggy Miller, wife of former State Senator Ken Miller, assert that the seminar is a prime opportunity for “a conscious effort to study the Constitution.” Smith adds,

I’ve taken the course before. It’s all about our Founding Fathers, the Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence. I just think it’s wonderful that the legislators and the people around Montana can take the seminar. It’s going to be an amazing experience, an educational experience. It’s just a wonderful opportunity. It’s open to the public, open to anyone who would like to attend.

The seminar, scheduled to take place on Saturday, is popular amongst a number of Tea Party groups.

The National Center for Constitutional Studies was founded in 1971 by W. Cleon Skousen, a former lecturer for the John Birch Society. Skousen wrote a number of books, including *The 5,000 Year Leap*, heavily promoted by Fox News television host Glenn Beck.

Montana’s constitutional seminar seems to correspond with Representative [Michelle Bachmann’s constitutional seminar](#) scheduled to take place in Washington, D.C. today, which features Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia as a guest lecturer.

According to Bachmann, an invitation to the seminar was extended to all congressmen, but a bipartisan mix of about 40 is expected to attend. She explained that today’s seminar will be one of a number featuring constitutional scholars such as Scalia.



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