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In the wake of George W. Bush's re-election in 2004, frustrated liberals talked secession back to within hailing distance of the margins of national debate - a place it had not occupied since 1861. With their praise of self-rule and the devolution of power, they sounded not unlike many conservatives had in the days before Bush & Cheney & Limbaugh wedded the American Right to the American Empire. While certain proponents of the renascent secessionism were motivated by spite or pixilated by whimsy or driven by the simple-minded belief that the United States can be divided into blue and red - as though our lovely land can be painted in only two hues! - others argued with cogency and passion for a disunionist position that bordered on the, well, seditious. Emphasizing both culture ("Now that slavery is taken care of, I'm for letting the South form its own nation," said Democratic operative Bob Beckel) and economics (Democratic pundit Lawrence O'Donnell noted that "ninety percent of the red states are welfare clients of the federal government"), writing in forums of neoliberalism (*Slate*) and paleoliberalism (*The Nation*), liberals helped to disinter a body of thought that had been buried at Appomattox. And - surprise! - three years later, the corpse has legs.

Secession is the next radical idea poised to enter mainstream discourse - or at least the realm of the conceivable. You can't bloat a modest republic into a crapulent empire without sparking one hell of a centrifugal reaction. And the prospect of breaking away from a union once consecrated to liberty and justice but now degenerating into imperial putrefaction will only grow in appeal as we go marching with our Patriot Acts and National Security Strategies through Iraq, Iran, and all the frightful signposts on our road to nowhere.

Some of the contemporary secessionists are puckish and playful; others are dead serious. Some seek to separate from the main body of a state and add a fifty-first star to the American flag while others wish to leave the United States altogether. Some proposals are so sensible (the division of California into two or three states) that in a just world they would be inevitable; others are so radical (the independent republic of Vermont) as to seem risibly implausible - until you meet the activists and theoreticians preparing these new declarations of independence.

For these movements are, in the main, hopeful and creative (if utopian) responses to the Current Mess engulfing our land. They are the political antidote to the disease of giantism. We are a nation born in secession, after all, and of rebellion against faraway rulers. Ruptures, crackups, and the splintering of overlarge states into polities of more manageable size, closer to the human scale, are as American as runaway slaves and draft resisters.

"Secession," says Rob Williams - Vermont filmmaker, radio host, Champlain College professor, and singer-songwriter of the ought-to-be classic "Kill Your Television" - "is every American's birthright."

It's been almost a century and a half since any significant number of Americans believed that, but last November Williams's verdantly democratic state hosted the first-ever nationwide conference of those who wish to make the nation a little less wide.

Yeah, sure, I know: breaking away is impossible. Quixotic. Hopeless. So was dancing on the Berlin Wall.

The Vermont gathering was convened by Kirkpatrick Sale, founder of the Middlebury Institute, a secessionist clearinghouse whose "ultimate task" is "the peaceful dissolution of the American empire." Sale is the author of the decentralist compendium *Human Scale* and books on the Luddites and Students for a Democratic Society. So that agents of the Department of Homeland Security won't have to pore over his works, he offers this description of his political vision: "I am an anarchist who wants to see society organized on a small, human scale, based on self-determining communities."

Sale scheduled the confab just three days before the 2006 election, not for any symbolic reason but because it was "the first cheap weekend after the fall foliage season." So upon Burlington converged the divergent. Forty-three delegates from eighteen states met around a long table in the Lake Champlain Salon of the Wyndham Burlington. I saw ponytails and suits, turtlenecks and sneakers, an Alaskan gold miner and one delegate from the neo-Confederate League of the South who wore a grey greatcoat, as if sitting for a daguerreotype just before the battle.

The location might seem, at first, thuddingly inappropriate. Secession talk in New England, cradle of Unionism, bête noire of the Confederacy, source of the "Battle Hymn of the (indivisible!) Republic"? Yet no region of the country has been as fertile a ground for secessionist thought as New England.

Yankees threatened to leave the Union in 1803 when Jefferson doubled the American realm with his constitutionally dubious Louisiana Purchase, and the cries of separation once again rang through the Northeast in 1814, when New Englanders, appalled by the War of 1812, met at the Hartford Convention to discuss going their own way. The Massachusetts Federalist Timothy Pickering heard "no magic in the sound of Union. If the great objects of union are utterly abandoned...let the union be severed. Such a severance presents no Terrors for me." The subject of an amicable divorce was raised in the 1840s during the debates over the annexation of Texas and the Mexican War. In each instance New England had a strong moral case for secession - and a practical one, too: the country had gotten too damn big to govern from a swamp on the Potomac. Daniel Webster, the God-like Daniel (on his good days), argued in 1846 that "there must be some limit to the extent of our territory, if we are to make our institutions permanent. The Government is very likely to be endangered...by a further enlargement of its already vast territorial surface."

By the 1850s, with its courageous defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act, New England had become the epicenter of states' rights - the logical end of which is secession - and of localist defiance of tyrannical central government. Yes, yes, a century hence racist governors would take possession of the phrase, but why should the fact that some southern politicians used "states'

rights” to justify segregation in the 1950s forever discredit the philosophy of Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry? I mean, look: George W. Bush uses the word “freedom” as often as a pimpled mall-rat says “fuck.” Does that mean we ought to junk “freedom”? Or should we reclaim it?

In its latest incarnation, secession has something of a greenish cast. It is reaching its fullest flower in Vermont, and if the idea of breaking away from the United States has not yet proven as exportable as, say, Vermont Teddy Bears or Cherry Garcia, give it time.

Thomas Naylor is the gentle godfather of the Vermont independence movement. Naylor taught economics at Duke for thirty years before, in best contrarian fashion, he and his wife Magdalena did a reverse snowbird and moved north in retirement to Charlotte, Vermont. In October 2003 he founded the hopefully named Second Vermont Republic (SVR). (The first one lasted from 1777-1791, before the Green Mountain Boys threw in with the United States.) Naylor proposed separating from the U.S., he says, almost as an afterthought. He was delivering an anti-war speech when he said, “If we stop this war there will only be another one. Whenever Bush or Slick Willie or Reagan need to improve their popularity they’ll bomb someone.” He came to a realization: A citizen of an independent Vermont might hope to live in a free and peaceful republic; a subject of the American Empire is doomed to watch helplessly as her taxes feed an unquenchable war machine. So why not leave the empire and pledge allegiance to Vermont? Naylor’s call struck a chord. A minor chord, perhaps, but a chord that has reverberated since 1776.

Because the Vermont secessionists were not sallow ideologues but rather men and women deeply in love with their state, they gained a foothold. The state has, perhaps, the most well-developed sense of itself of any state in the lower 48, and the SVR is awash in Vermontishness, from maple syrup to Robert Frost.

Member Jim Hogue frequently dresses as the state’s rollicking founder, Ethan Allen, and delivers hortatory speeches. Rob Williams, editor of the SVR quarterly *Vermont Commons*, seeks to “create a visual iconography of Vermont secession” as a means of making secession “sexy - an attractive, interesting, viable political option.”

Vermont Commons is a gem: a literate, polemical, thought-provoking, radical newspaper that has featured contributions from the likes of Wendell Berry, Bill McKibben, James Howard Kunstler, Burlington mayor Peter Clavelle, and a cast of politically uncategorizable Vermonters. For the stream of secession is fed by many American springs: the participatory democracy dreams of the New Left, the small-is-beautiful ethos of the greens, the traditional conservative suspicion (fading fast under the Bush eraser) of big government and remote bureaucracy, and that old-fashioned American blend of don’t-tread-on-me libertarianism with I’ll-give-you-the-shirt-off-my-back communalism.

The *Vermont Commons* contributors ask and sometimes even answer the hard questions about secession: How would a local currency work? How do we revive town meeting democracy? How does Vermont achieve “a sustainable food system”? How does it encourage community supported agriculture, organic farms, co-ops, roadside markets, and backyard gardening? What would an independent Vermont energy policy look like?

In October 2005, the SVR hosted 250 Vermont secessionists at a statewide conference in the capitol building in Montpelier (rent: \$35). It was richly symbolic, messily democratic, and sweetly audacious. You can do that in Vermont. (California is another story.) The group’s next goal is “200 towns by 2012”: that is, using the venerable direct-democracy institution of town meeting, the SVR hopes by 2012 to persuade 200 of Vermont’s 237 towns to call for a convention at which Vermonters can debate the merits of independence. Scoff if you will, but remember that the front-runners for the Democratic and Republican presidential nominations of 2008 supported the Iraq war and the Patriot Act. In 2012, a decade into a nightmarish “war on terror” that our rulers have assured us will last our lifetimes, will Americans be content with a status quo of perpetual war and profligate empire?

My sympathy for the secessionists bleeds all over the page. I am, after all, native to and still citizen of rural western New York, which is about as close as one can find to a powerless colony.

Still, a state of West New York would be a new star on Old Glory. So would proposed fissioned states in northern California and southern Oregon (which would combine to form the felicitously named State of Jefferson) and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. On the other hand, the secessionists assembled at Kirk Sale’s Burlington convention wanted, for the most part, out of the Union altogether. They wish to be lone stars. Or if that sounds too grand - for a star, up close, is burning and blinding and unfit to love - maybe we should just say that they want to be, like demoted demotic Pluto, “dwarf planets” whom the giants disdain to notice. Or attack.

“This isn’t right or left,” said one advocate of an independent New Hampshire. Peaceful hippies, good-naturedly radical Vermonters, and anticorporate leftists broke bread with southern Christians and men wearing Confederate flag lapel pins, and the skies did not darken nor the earth crack. In fact, the most striking feature of the conference was that if an auditor closed his eyes and blocked out the accents, it was hard to tell who was the leftist and who was the arch-conservative.

I heard mentioned, as heroes, Martin Luther King Jr., Robert E. Lee, community organizer Saul Alinsky, Thomas Jefferson, and the strategist of nonviolence Gene Sharp. Denunciations were made of “corporate greed,” “federal empire,” television, the Iraq war, and the Patriot Act.

Were there fruits and nuts? Sure, a few. But just as cranks keep this country turning, so too are fruits and nuts a sapid alternative to Wonder Bread. The furry, troll-like man who proclaims himself King of Kansas is imaginative and harmless; the shaven men in tailored suits who call themselves President of the United States have been, of late, unimaginative and grossly harmful. I’ll take the King of Kansas, thank you very much. If some secessionists are wool-gathering gnomes, the

best of them are patriots in the truest sense: they cherish the music, literature, accents, agriculture, history, and quirks of their places.

Secessionists - most of them, anyway - are all too aware that what they seek (the dissolution of the mightiest empire on the planet Earth) borders the inconceivable. But they have made peace with its implausibility and moved on. Reform they scorn; he who works within the system is swallowed by the system. Taking up arms is madness. "Rebellion and revolution are useless," says Sale. "You would be crushed." If you want out of a bloated empire and dehumanizing system, secession is the path.

"The left-right thing has got to go," declares Ian Baldwin, cofounder of Chelsea Green Publishing and publisher of *Vermont Commons*. "We're decentralists and we are up against a monster."

What might replace left and right, liberal and conservative, as useful political bipolarities? Globalist and localist, perhaps, or placeless versus placeist. Baldwin argues that "peak oil and climate change are linked and irreversible events that will within a generation change how human beings live. The world economy will relocalize." He dismisses homeland security as "fatherland security" - for "homeland," with its Nazi-Soviet echoes, has never been what Americans call their country. What we need, says Baldwin, is "homestead security": sustainable agriculture, small shops, a revival of craftsmanship, local citizenship, communal spirit. The vision is one of self-government. Independence from the empire but interdependence at the grassroots. Neighborliness. The other American Dream.

Why should Vermont (or Kansas or Mississippi) be compelled by strangers in Washington to implant computer chips in its cattle and send its state militia (now known as the National Guard) to fight in overseas wars and register its firearms and subject its children to standardized tests and participate in federal farm programs that privilege corporate agribusiness? Aren't Vermonters, guided by their intimate knowledge of local conditions, capable of fashioning their own laws (or non-laws) on such matters?

Step back and it sounds fantastical: little Vermont wanting out of the United States. But secessionists are fond of the Soviet example. If, in 1985, you had stood on a platform and predicted that within a lustrum the Soviet Union would be all but dissolved, the snickers would have filled a candy factory. Sale also likes to point out that the United Nations, founded with 51 members in 1945, now has 192. Why not 193?

Still, the S-word has, to some, a treasonous taint. It's not that Americans see it as a black-and-white issue; no, they see it through a haze of blue and gray. "Abraham Lincoln really did a number on us," admits Naylor. "He convinced the vast majority of Americans that secession is illegal, immoral, and unconstitutional."

Naylor's frustration over Lincoln's giant shadow is shared by Donald Livingston, a philosopher at Emory University and the "guru" of the new secessionists, as Naylor calls him. "Historiography in America is based on the fundamental postulate that the Union should have been preserved at all costs," says Livingston. He proposes to challenge that assumption, to inspire students and colleagues and those tired of the consolidationist consensus to write history from a decentralist perspective. Livingston's educational foundation, the Abbeville Institute, takes as its motto, "Divided We Stand; United We Fall." The U.S.A., he believes, no longer works; why not try the Disunited States of America?

Critics of secession wonder if devolving power might not empower local tyrannies. For instance, the Vermonters have taken flak for cooperating with the League of the South, which is either a southern cultural organization with an official commitment to equality before the law or an unsavory group nostalgic for the Confederacy, depending upon whom you believe. Yet the range and potential of oppressive government has natural limits in a small jurisdiction. If a town in Alabama—or an upscale precinct in Manhattan—falls under the sway of knaves or crooks, abused minorities can remonstrate, face to face, with the authorities. They can organize resistance on a human scale. Or, if all else fails, they can leave. Even at the state level, redress is not impossible. Subjects of a large empire have no such option (other than expatriating). And unlike the Alabama town or Manhattan block, the U.S. government can wage wars, fill prisons, and curtail liberties on a scale undreamt of by petty tyrants. I suppose it comes down to this: Do you trust your neighbors, or do you trust George W. Bush and Hillary Clinton?

The crimes and follies of the Bush-Cheney administration have boosted secessionists' fortunes, but when Bush-Cheney, like all things, passes, the case for radical devolution loses none of its cogency. The problem with the U.S. is one of scale, and it cannot be solved by electing new or different or better people to public offices. As Donald Livingston says, "The public corporation known as the United States has simply grown too large for the purposes of self-government, in the same way that a committee of three hundred people would be too large for the purposes of a committee. There needs to be a public debate on the out-of-scale character of the regime and what can be done about it."

The average congressional district now contains 647,000 persons. And this is the "people's house," thought by the Founders to be the most responsive and grassroots of federal institutions. How is anything like representative government possible on such an enormous and impersonal scale?

Decentralizing power would have the additional virtue of localizing those coalition-splitters known as "social issues." Case in point: When one of the southern delegates at the Burlington convention calls abortion a heinous crime, I sit back to watch the fireworks. They are doused in the fresh waters of federalism. There is general agreement on a mind-your-own-damn-business principle. If Marin County wants to serve joints with school lunches and Tupelo, Mississippi, wants the Ten Commandments in the classroom, well, that's up to the people of Marin and Tupelo. Ain't none of my business. Yours, either.

Let Utah be Utah, and let San Francisco be San Francisco. The policy will drive busybodies mad with frustration, but for the rest of us, it just might be the beginning of tolerance.

There is no reason why this kind of hands-off mutuality requires secession - they didn't used to call the U.S. system "federalism" for nothing - but the urge to intervene is so irresistible to Dobsonian conservatives and Clintonian liberals that states and cities and towns have been deprived of the right to make their own laws, shaped by local circumstances, on such matters as the legality of marijuana and abortion and the proper way (if any) to define marriage. Does anyone really think that the Christian Right or feminist left will ever agree to denationalize such issues and trust local people to make their own laws?

Trust local people. That, really, is the soul of the case for secession. Bringing it all back home, as a small-town Minnesota boy who took the name Bob Dylan once wrote. For home is where secession must be rooted. Ideology of any sort is not so much a dead end as it is a road without end that carries the enthusiast far from any place resembling home. It unmoors him, it leaves her without anchorage, quick to blame societal ills on outsiders, on dark alien forces. I know: we live in the seventh year of the bloody and imperial Bush Octennium. If Dick Cheney isn't a dark alien force I don't know what is. But a healthy secessionist movement must be founded in love: love of a particular place, its people (of all ethnicities and colors), its culture, its language and books and music and baseball teams and, yes, its beer and flowers and punk rock clubs.

Maybe the Burlington conference was a sideshow, an amusing tour of the more outré precincts of American politics. Or maybe it was a harbinger.

Think what you will. This is radicalism deep-dyed in the American grain. "The military-industrial-energy-media complex is running an empire on the ruins of the republic," says Rob Williams, who does not think that merely putting Democratic hands on the levers of power will solve anything. It's the levers themselves that have to be removed.

Would the union miss Vermont? Sure. But as a young John Quincy Adams said, "I love the Union as I love my wife. But if my wife should ask for and insist upon a separation, she should have it, though it broke my heart."

Besides, Vermont's not going anywhere. Even if she were to secede, the Green Mountains will not be moved, the sap will still flow, the novels of Howard Frank Moshier and Dorothy Canfield Fisher will remain; hell, even Ben & Jerry's will keep dishing it out. But why shouldn't Vermonters run Vermont? Why should, say, Senator Hillary Clinton or Senator John McCain or Speaker Nancy Pelosi or President George W. Bush have even a whisper of a say in how Vermont orders her affairs?

"I want to leave my country," says Kirk Sale, "without leaving my home." That line packs a jolt, at least for this Little American. My home comes first. Yet I also want my country. I'm not sure what I think about leaving the U.S.A. But isn't it time that we gave the matter some thought?

Bill Kauffman's latest book is Look Homeward, America. His book on American peace movements will be published next winter. He lives in Elba, New York.

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