

Untied States

If at first you don't secede...

By John Schwenkler

WHOEVER WINS ON NOV. 4, few Americans will harbor any illusions about their national unity. No matter which pairing one chooses—red and blue, Right and Left, coastal elites and flyover salt-of-the-earthers—there is no getting around our status as a country divided, a people set apart from one another as much by regional culture as by religion or political ideology.

A perfect time, in other words, to talk about secession—which is what will happen when the Middlebury Institute's Third North American Secessionist Conference convenes in Manchester, New Hampshire a week and a half after the election. Thomas Naylor, whose Second Vermont Republic is one of the country's most active secessionist organizations, is candid about the motive for the scheduling: "The date was set," he tells me, "on the assumption that Hillary Clinton would be elected—and of course that's not going to happen." Nevertheless, the post-election timeframe is "looking more and more important every day" as popular outrage against the Wall Street bailout and anxiety over impending recession continue to build.

The Manchester conference brings together secessionists of all types. Writing in *Orion*, Bill Kauffman described the crowd from 2006 as "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." Despite—or perhaps because of—their ideological differences, they all

share a common cause: to regionalize, to decentralize, to debunk the myth of a nation indivisible and replace it with a nation that gives difference its due.

That story is by no means a new one. The idea of political separatism is, as Middlebury Institute founder Kirkpatrick Sale puts it, "as American as America." From the 13 colonies declaring their independence from the British Crown in 1776, to the rash of state-splittings that took place during the early years of the Republic, to Norman Mailer's secessionist 1969 campaign for mayor of New York City, the aura of divisibility has long been a part of the American tradition.

Throughout the years, the causes of such division have been as varied as the makeup of the American tapestry itself. Consider the movement that sprang up on the border of California and Oregon in 1941, when a group of disgruntled miners and loggers stormed the courthouse in Curry County, Oregon, brought several counties from Northern California on board to form a provisional government, and established the mining town of Yreka—pronounced "why-REE-kuh"—as the unlikely capital of the even more unlikely State of Jefferson. (The state's name, which recalled the independent streak of the most rebellious of the American founders, was settled on only after such proposals as "Orofino" and "Mittelwestcoastia" were mercifully rejected.) The rebel flag bore a pair of X's to indicate that the region had been doublecrossed by the governments in Sacramento and Eugene, and storekeepers put out change buckets for shoppers

who wanted to redirect their sales-tax pennies from the state treasuries. Local men armed with hunting rifles set up roadblocks along the Klamath River Highway, distributing copies of a Proclamation of Independence that explained that they were in "patriotic rebellion against the States of California and Oregon" and planned to "secede each Thursday until further notice."

The State of Jefferson turned out to be short-lived—the sudden death of its first governor was followed quickly by the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, which sent the country into a fit of patriotic fervor that left little room for rebellion. But the spirit of '41 lives on in men like Leo Bergeron, a 70-year-old former rancher and 17-year resident of California's Siskiyou County. He wears a loosely-hung bolo tie with his golf shirt and shows no signs of losing the energy that once made him president of the state Grange and led him to run for county supervisor earlier this year. He's working to revive the State of Jefferson. "There's becoming a state, becoming a territory, and becoming our own country," he tells me. "The first two are the hardest because you need all sorts of approval from the legislators, but with the third option you can just tell 'em all to go to hell. It's really all about independence—we know this place, and we know how to govern ourselves. We don't need some a--holes from Washington or Sacramento telling us what to do."

A dreamer? Sure, but no doubt they said that about the original Jefferson, too. And it's not as if Bergeron and his

crew don't have their own King George in the form of the state and national administrations. Back in 1941, the uprising was the product of poor road conditions and a distant government that seemed more intent on exploiting the area's resources than attending to its residents and their livelihoods. Today, the Jefferson secessionists are motivated by that same distant government, which now imposes a staggering roster of environmental and other regulations that threaten the jobs of local farmers, miners, loggers, and even Klamath River medical marijuana growers. One way or another, these northernmost Californians and their Oregonian neighbors plan to find a way to put control of their communities back in their own hands.

Thomas Naylor insists that the ideological diversity that brings together the environmentalist-bashing, property-rights activists of Yreka and anti-globalization leftists like Sale and himself is a feature, not a bug, of the push for political self-determination. Asked whether

remains a contributing editor of *The Nation*—have not kept him from being accused, like Naylor, of being a crypto-racist because of his willingness to associate with the League of the South, takes a similar tack. Such diversity is “the reality of America today,” he tells me. “It’s more than just blue states versus red states, it’s all kinds of states wanting different things. So I say—let them. And if it turns out that the state I’m in does things that I don’t like, then I can go somewhere else nearby where an independent republic is to my liking.” It’s really none of his business, he says, what might go on in an independent South; all that the Vermonters want is the authority to keep the ever-encroaching Leviathan from continuing to entangle itself in their own corner of the woods.

To the extent that all this sounds at once deeply radical yet strangely familiar, things are exactly as they should be. The “so-called American Revolution,” Sale observes, “was in fact a war of secession, not revolt.” What’s more, the

halt. And not without reason: most historians still treat the traditional narrative of the Civil War as largely unproblematic, and the history of the American South with regard to slavery and race relations is nothing short of appalling. But then, the Northern states have their own repulsive history of racism, slavery, and the abuse and extermination of native populations. And there’s no disputing that the broader history of American territorial expansion—Hawaii, anyone?—has often been every bit as lawless and imperial as Lincoln’s worst critics accuse him of having been. These historical crimes do not belong only to one region. Moreover, even a negative assessment of the Confederate question does not disbar one from remaining open to the possibility that other secessionist movements might be rooted in more legitimate grievances.

Donald Livingston, an Emory University philosopher who has been similarly maligned over his distaste for Lincoln, suggests that the roots of America’s conflicted understandings of secession and states’ rights run deep. According to Livingston, who is at work on a book-length philosophical treatment of secession, present-day Americans are the inheritors of two “incommensurable Americanisms.” On the one hand, there is the Jeffersonian model of political order, which locates sovereignty in the small scale and thus treats secession as “a lawful act of a natural political society.” In contrast, the Lincolnian conception regards America as one nation indivisible—a “perpetual” and “indissoluble union,” in the language of *Texas v. White*—in which case “secession then would be revolution; it would be incompatible with government as such.” It was the dominance of the Jeffersonian conception that explains the success of the early split-state movements listed by

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we should be concerned about independent governments tossing out state or federal protections for the environment and civil rights, he tells me, “It’s hard to imagine anyone doing a worse job of solving most of our problems than the U.S. government, and over the long run these problems are best dealt with in the hands of small groups of people who’ve got a stake in them. Maybe the way that people in Northern California deal with the environment is not exactly the way that Vermont tree-huggers would embrace, but it’s their way.”

Sale, whose impeccable leftist credentials—he was a founder of Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s and

early years of the Republic established a tradition of states seceding from one another when they reached a certain size: Maine from Massachusetts in 1820, Tennessee from North Carolina in 1796, Kentucky and (more controversially) West Virginia from Virginia in 1792 and 1861. And as for the other events of 1861? Those “were not so successful,” he admits, “but they failed only because corporate America, becoming strong and expansionary in the North, found a dictator who could crush them.”

It’s here, of course, that things get tricky, since in many quarters the merest whiff of Civil War revisionism is enough to bring the discussion to a screeching

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An Empire We Can't Afford

"LIQUIDATE LABOR, liquidate stocks, liquidate the farmers." So Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon advised Herbert Hoover in the Great Crash of '29.

Hoover did. And the nation liquidated him—and the Republicans.

In the crash of 2008, 40 percent of stock value has vanished, almost \$9 trillion. Some \$5 trillion in real estate value has disappeared. A recession looms with sweeping layoffs, unemployment compensation surging, and social-welfare benefits soaring. America's first trillion-dollar deficit is at hand. In fiscal Year 2008, the deficit was \$438 billion.

With tax revenue sinking, we will add to this year's deficit the \$200 to \$300 billion needed to wipe the rotten paper off the books of Fannie and Freddie, the \$700 billion (plus the \$100 billion in additions and pork) for the Wall Street bailout, the \$85 billion to bail out AIG, and \$37 billion more now needed, the \$25 billion for GM, Chrysler, and Ford, and the hundreds of billions Hank Paulson will need to buy corporate paper and bail out banks to stop the panic.

As Americans save nothing, where are the feds going to get the money? Is the Fed going to print it and destroy the dollar and credit rating of the United States? The nations whose vaults are full of dollars and U.S. debt—China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Arabs—are reluctant to lend us more. Sovereign wealth funds that plunged billions into U.S. banks have already been burned.

Uncle Sam's Visa card is about to be stamped "Canceled." The budget is going to have to go under the knife. But what gets cut?

Social Security and Medicare are surely exempt. Seniors have already taken a huge hit in their 401(k)'s. And as

the Democrats are crafting another \$150 billion stimulus package for the working poor and middle class, Medicaid and food stamps are untouchable. Interest on the debt cannot be cut. It is going up. Will a Democratic Congress slash unemployment benefits, welfare, education, student loans, and veterans' benefits—in a recession?

No way. Yet that is almost the entire U.S. budget—except for defense, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and foreign aid. And this is where the axe will eventually fall.

It is the American Empire that is going to be liquidated.

Retrenchment has begun with Bush's backing away from confrontations with Axis of Evil charter members Iran and North Korea over their nuclear programs and will likely continue with a negotiated peace in Afghanistan. General Petraeus and Secretary Gates are already talking "reconciliation" with the Taliban.

We no longer live in Eisenhower or Reagan's America. Even the post-Cold War world of George H.W. Bush, where America was a global hegemon, is history. In both relative and real terms, the U.S. is a diminished power.

Where Ike spent 9 percent of GDP on defense and Reagan 6 percent, we spend 4 percent. Yet we have two wars bleeding us and many more nations to defend, with commitments in the Baltic, Eastern Europe, and the Balkans we did not have in the Cold War. As U.S. weapons systems are many times more expensive today, we have fewer strategic aircraft and Navy ships than Ike or Reagan commanded. Our active-duty Army and Marine Corps consist of 700,000 troops, and a far higher percentage of them are support rather than combat troops.

With so few legions, we cannot police the world, and we cannot afford more. Yet we face a host of newly hostile nations we did not have in 1989.

U.S. interests in Latin America are being challenged not only by Cuba but Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Honduras. Brazil, Argentina, and Chile go their own way. Russia is reasserting hegemony in the Caucasus, testing new ICBM's and running bomber probes up to U.S. air space. China, growing at 10 percent as we head into recession, is bristling over U.S. military sales to Taiwan. Iran remains defiant. Pakistan is rife with anti-Americanism and al-Qaeda sentiment.

The American Empire has become a vast extravagance. With U.S. markets crashing and wealth vanishing, what are we doing with 750 bases and troops in over 100 countries?

With a recession of unknown depth and duration looming, why keep borrowing billions from rich Arabs to defend rich Europeans, or billions from China and Japan to hand out in Millennium Challenge Grants to Tanzania and Burkina Faso?

America needs a bottom-up review of all strategic commitments dating to a Cold War now over for 20 years.

Is it essential to keep 30,000 troops in a South Korea with twice the population and 40 times the wealth of the North? Why are McCain and Obama offering NATO memberships, *i.e.*, war guarantees against Russia, to a Georgia run by a hothead like Mikheil Saakashvili and a Ukraine whose people prefer their kinship to Russia to an alliance with us?

We must put "country first," says John McCain. Right you are, Senator. Time to look out for America first. ■