Going It Alone

by Frank Bryan

The Case for Vermont's Secession

As the high luxury of the 1990 budget negotiations showed, America's federal arrangement has been replaced by a confederation of special interests that have less in common than the former colonies—or even, perhaps, than the states that comprise the United Nations. America resembles more a League of Interests than it does a nation.

The solution is too obvious to be seriously considered. We must spread out the work of democracy. We must decentralize, deregulate, and reempower; not under the assumption that this will mean less government, but under the knowledge that it will mean better government. John McClaughry and I put it this way in The Vermont Papers:

This then is the great American challenge of the twenty-first century: saving the center by shortening its parts, preserving union by emphasizing division, making cosmopolitanism possible by rushing parochialism necessary, restoring the representative republic by rebuilding direct democracy, strengthening the national character through a rebirth of local citizenship.

But a "new" federalism created through incrementalism will never happen. It is time for something different. What we need must be radical. It must be dramatic. Vermont should secede.

There is only one serious argument against such a move and that is that other states might follow suit. The answer to this is to give Vermont the opportunity to conduct what Langdon Winner calls "niche" analysis. His hope for societal advancement is to allow certain systems broad latitude in sociopolitical experimentation. We do this now on a very small scale to test out limited kinds of public policy. America should give Vermont the slack it needs to steer its own course. We contribute about one-tenth of one percent of the national tax base. Hence while New York or California could not secede under the present circumstances, Vermont can. What this country needs is a good swift slap alongside the head and Vermont is just the state to give it.

As Vermonters we stand on the high ground. For two centuries we have worked from within to preserve and enhance the Union. We have been patient. We have carried more than our share of the load. But enough is enough. If the federal government appears every red cent Vermonters pay in income taxes to what it has already lost in the FMHA, HUD, and S&L scandals, it will take us until the end of time to pay it back. Our contribution to the national government for the next half century has already been spent. This isn't wasted money. It is lost money.

Last spring, after seven of Vermont's seventeen communities voted overwhelmingly to secede from the union, I spoke at Blue Mountain High School in Wells River. The occasion: the burning of their mortgage for the new school building. They were debt-free. These good people in their three little towns with their little school and burdened with big property taxes belied every year for twenty years and paid back what they owed, principal plus interest.

In Washington the interest on the debt threatens to take one-third of our tax money each year. To retire that debt would require a stack of thousand-dollar bills 204 miles high. Leaving the Union will involve the breaking of no promises. Our contract with America made two hundred years ago has been breached by a national government with an unquenchable thirst for power. When we signed on, the American Constitution ensured us that "the powers not delegated to the U.S. by the Constitution are not prohibit-
ed by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people." Is there anyone left in America today who does not understand that the reserved power clause has become a joke? The author of a leading college textbook put it this way: "Actions by Congress and the Federal Courts have gradually undermined the 10th Amendment. It now bears little relevance to the configuration of American Federalism in the 1990's."

When the Supreme Court held in 1985 that the Congress could control the way localities in the states deal with their own municipal employees, a dissenting judge said: "All that stands between the remaining essentials of state sovereignty and Congress is the latter's undeveloped capacity for self-restraint." Just this year Vermont decided it was hopeless to pursue a suit before the courts whereby we sought to retain our right to set a retirement age for our own judges. And when the feds want control over something so clearly a state's right that even the most centrist judge can't find a way to make it "constitutional," the Congress takes the right away by threatening to withhold our own mon-
ey from us. These are called "crossover sanctions." In the 1980's Ronald Rea-
gan, in an act of mind-wrenching hy-

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Vermont, Vermont was America's first frontier. It was born free, never a colony of the crown, never a territory of some distant power. For 14 years (1777-1791), it existed as an independent republic doing these things nation's did in those days—voting money, raising armies, engaging in foreign relations. We joined the Union five and clear in 1791, the 14th state. 

But while the War of 1812, our bees swarmed feeding the British army in Canada—a move we could turn one northern neighbor of our all occasion. We also ignored the fugitives Slave Act. Vermont Supreme Court Justice Thaddeus Harrington demanded a "Bill of Sale from the Almighty" before he would return a runaway slave.

In 1867 Vermont provided a staging ground for the Irish Fenian's who attacked Canada from Franklin, Vermont. United States marshals had been sent to Vermont to halt the process. We ignored them. In 1917, when America declared war on Germany, Vermont did so, in effect, by appropriating one million dollars real money in three days for war against Germany. The largest newspaper in the state editorialized that if Vermont insisted on fighting the Germans all by herself, we should raise none instead of saving bonds to pay for it.

In 1927 the worst national disaster in the state's history struck. After the flood, Vermont's Coolidge offered federal help. Rep. Governor John Weeks, "Vermont will take care of its own." A few years later the nation offered to bail Vermont out of the Depression, with the biggest public works program in the history of the state—a Blue Ridge Parkway-like highway through the top of Vermont's famed Green Mountains. Nope, said Vermont to an astonished America. In the most democratic expression of environmental consciousness in American history, Vermonters assembled in their town meetings in March of 1936, and voted to reject the proposal and all the federal loot that went with it. In September of 1941, the Vermont legislature passed a law providing for funds for Vermont soldiers to fight Japan.

Vermonters, like Vermonters, are good Americans. But somewhere along the way they've switched churches on us. The patriotic feeling to do is politely to excuse ourselves.

Vermont's history is a mirror of America's. The people of Vermont have fought for independence, freedom, and their own way of life. They have resisted foreign domination and defended their rights, just as Vermonters do today.

Vermont's history is a testament to the power of the people. It is a history of resistance and resilience, of standing up for what is right and true. Vermonters have always been proud of their history and their state, and they will continue to fight for their way of life.

In summary, Vermont is a state of contrasts, of beauty and ruggedness, of history and future. It is a state that values its independence and freedom, and is proud of its role in shaping the course of American history. Vermonters are a people of spirit, of character, and of courage, who will always stand up for what they believe in.
much of the money we get from Washington we spend on things we don't need in order to get funds for things we do need. Top it off with the realization that every dime we get back over and above what we pay in is borrowed money (deficit money).

Even some of the original cost of the things we pay in taxes probably comes back in bad (borrowed) money. In other words, if the deficit is over 15 percent of the budget, then 15 percent of our federal patch is borrowed money. In order to give us back $1.13 for every $1.00 we pay in, the federal government would have to borrow 17 cents. In these terms, Vermont's "great deal" looks like this: for every dollar Vermonters pay in federal taxes, we get back 98 cents in cash and a loan of 17 cents. If we kept our original bucket we could decide whether or not to borrow an extra 15 cents on our own terms and we could spend the whole thing as we see fit.

It is true that Vermont benefits from something we might call "national infrastructure," the most obvious example of which is the defense budget. The interstate highway might be another example. But remember this. The interstate system was not built under the National Defense Highway Act. We passed over a good deal of Vermont in large part because Washington needs these roads (or so they said) to defend America. Against what? An attack from Canada? Soviet troops sledding over the ice cap?

Think of the Vermont tax dollars that go into the U.S. defense budget now. Vermont will need no army after secession. A couple of dozen more state troopers and a militia organized from local fire and rescue organizations will be enough. American tanks rolling into Bennington! It's never happen. All we have to do is simply extend our independence and leave. Our very act of secession will be our greatest strength.

We have an open border to the north to a country that owes us for our designs neglect during the War of 1812 and to a province of that country with secessionist ideas of its own. "It takes a big government to solve big issues," the Star War argument. My opponent in the secessionist debates, Vermont Supreme Court Justice John Dooley, stated that "Aid can won't be ended by cute little nations like a new Republic of Vermont." Wrong. The history of the last two decades has shown an increasing incapacity of the federal government to make projects where real conflict among the states exist.

The federal government likes to "facilitate" cooperation and then take credit for natural impulses for consensus that are locally inspired. It is the states and localities that are "putting Washington in their state," as one publication recently put it, in the field of environmental protection. In Vermont we find again and again that Washington is a hindrance to attempts to protect the environment. Nowhere is the principle that mediocrity is the best you can hope for when problems and benefits are diffused over large systems more apparent than in environmental protection. It can be argued, for instance, that the federal government caused the acid rain problem because it was forced to compromise over smokestacks and scrubbers when it sought to protect Midwestern cities from their own pollution in the 1970s.

The fact of the matter is that Vermont's influence as an independent Republic would be vastly greater than even the best efforts of our Senators in Washington can produce. International cooperation rather than intra-national action is the emerging dynamic in environmental policy. The 21st century must develop a global perspective on the environment. Both Vermont and the world of nations would benefit from our active and equal participation in this perspective.