

In Vermont, nascent secession movement gains traction

AP Associated Press

By John Curran, Associated Press Writer | June 3, 2007

MONTPELIER, Vt. --At Riverwalk Records, the all-vinyl record store just down the street from the state Capitol, the black "US Out of Vt.!" T-shirts are among the hottest sellers.

But to some people in Vermont, the idea is bigger than a \$20 novelty. They want Vermont to secede from the United States -- peacefully, of course.

Disillusioned by what they call an empire about to fall, a small cadre of writers and academics is plotting political strategy and planting the seeds of separatism.

They've published a "Green Mountain Manifesto" subtitled "Why and How Tiny Vermont Might Help Save America From Itself by Seceding from the Union." They hope to put the question before citizens at Town Meeting Day next March, eventually persuading the state Legislature to declare independence, returning Vermont to the status it held from 1777 to 1791.

Whether it's likely is another question.

But the idea has found plenty of sympathetic ears in Vermont, a left-leaning state that said yes to civil unions, no to slavery (before any other) and last year elected a socialist to the U.S. Senate.

About 300 people turned out for a 2005 secession convention in the Statehouse, and plans for a second one are in the works. A poll this year by the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies found that 13 percent of those surveyed support secession, up from 8 percent a year before.

"The argument for secession is that the U.S. has become an empire that is essentially ungovernable -- it's too big, it's too corrupt and it no longer serves the needs of its citizens," said Rob Williams, editor of Vermont Commons, a quarterly newspaper dedicated to secession.

"Congress and the executive branch are being run by the multinationals. We have electoral fraud, rampant corporate corruption, a culture of militarism and war. If you care about democracy and self-governance and any kind of representative system, the only constitutional way to preserve what's left of the Republic is to peaceably take apart the empire."

Such movements have a long history. Key West, Fla., staged a mock secession from America in the 1980s. The Town of Killington, Vt., tried to break away and join New Hampshire in 2004, and Hawaii, Alaska, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Texas all have some form of secession organizations today.

The Vermont movement, which is being pushed by several different groups, has been bubbling up for years but has gained new traction in the wake of disenchantment over the Iraq war, rising oil prices and the formation of the pro-secession groups.

Among its architects:

--Thomas Naylor, 70, a retired Duke University economics professor and author who wrote the manifesto and founded Second Vermont Republic, a group pressing for secession, in 2003.

--author Kirkpatrick Sale, 69, founder of the Middlebury Institute, a Cold Spring, N.Y., think tank that hosted a North American Separatist Convention that drew representatives from 16 organizations last fall in Burlington. The group is co-sponsoring another one Oct. 3-4 in Chattanooga, Tenn.

--author Frank Bryan, 65, a professor at the University of Vermont who has championed the cause for years.

Naylor's 112-page manifesto contains precious little explanation of how Vermont would do without federal aid and programs when it comes to security, education and social programs. Some in the movement foresee a Vermont with its own currency and passports, for example, and some form of representative government formed once the secession has taken place.

The cachet of secession would make the new republic a magnet, Bryan said recently during a strategy session with organizers in Naylor's home.

"People would obviously relish coming to the Republic of Vermont, the Switzerland of North America," he said. "Christ, you couldn't keep them away."

But there are plenty of skeptics.

"It doesn't make economic sense, it doesn't make political sense, it doesn't make historical sense. Other than that, it's a good idea," said Paul Gillies, a lawyer and Vermont historian.

While neither the Vermont Constitution nor the U.S. Constitution forbids secession per se, few think it's viable.

"I always thought the Civil War settled that," said Russell Wheeler, a constitutional law expert at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C.

"If Vermont had a powerful enough army and said, 'We're leaving the union,' and the national government said, 'No, you're not,' and they fought a war over it and Vermont won, then you could say Vermont proved the point. But that's not going to happen," he said.

For now, the would-be secessionists are hoping to draw enough support to get the question on Town Meeting Day agendas.

"We're normal human beings," said Williams, 39, a history professor at Champlain College. "But we're serious about this. We want people in Vermont to think about the options going forward. Do you want to stay in an empire that's in deep trouble?"

Second Vermont Republic: <http://www.vermontrepublic.org/>

Middlebury Institute: <http://middleburyinstitute.org/>

Free Vermont.net: <http://www.freevermont.net> ■