

Free Vermont

Green Mountain boys ponder secession.

By Bill Kauffman

ORGANIZERS BILLED the Vermont Independence Convention of Oct. 28 as “the first statewide convention on secession in the United States since North Carolina voted to secede from the Union on May 20, 1861.” North Carolina, the final state to join the Confederacy, overcame its unionist scruples with some reluctance; by contrast, the 250 or so Vermonters gathered in Montpelier, that coziest of state capitals, gloried in the prospect of disunion.

Montpelier is the only McDonald’s-less state capital in the land, and from its late October splendor issued a Jeffersonian firebell in the night, ringing a warning to the national capital: the United States deserve a break(up) today.

Only in Vermont, with its town-meeting tradition and tolerance of radical dissent, would the golden-domed State Capitol be given over to a convention exploring the whys and wherefores of splitting from the United States. And all for a rental fee of \$35! (It would have been free if the disunionists had knocked off by 4 p.m.)

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Thomas Naylor, a Mississippi native and longtime professor of economics at Duke, who in best contrarian fashion flew north in retirement to the Green Mountain State, is the founder, theoretician, and chief sticker-of-stamps-on-envelopes for the Second Vermont Republic (SVR), which declares itself “a peaceful, democratic, grassroots, libertarian populist movement committed to the return of Vermont to its status as an

independent republic as it once was between 1777 and 1791.”

The Second Vermont Republic has a clear, if not simple, mission: “Our primary objective is to extricate Vermont peacefully from the United States as soon as possible.” The SVR people are not doing this to “make a point” or to stretch the boundaries of debate. They really want out.

Although SVR members range from hippie greens to gun owners—and among the virtues of Vermont is that the twain do sometimes meet—Naylor describes his group’s ideological coloration as “leftish libertarian with an anarchist streak.”

The SVR lauds the principles and practices of direct democracy, local control of education and health care, small-scale farming, neighborhood enterprise, and the devolution of political power. The movement is anti-globalist and sees beauty in the small. It detests Wal-Mart, the Interstate Highway System, and a foreign policy that is “immoral, illegal, and unconstitutional.” It draws inspiration from, among others, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who in bidding farewell to his neighbors in Cavendish, Vermont, where he had lived in exile for 17 years, praised “the sensible and sure process of grassroots democracy, in which the local population solves most of its problems on its own, not waiting for the decisions of higher authorities.”

Naylor likes to say that Wal-Mart, which is “too big, too powerful, too intrusive, too mean-spirited, too materialistic, too dehumanizing, too undemocratic,

too environmentally insensitive, and too unresponsive to the social, cultural, and economic needs of individual citizens and small communities,” is the American metaphor in these post-republic days. Perhaps it is. So why not a new metaphor, suggests Naylor: that of Vermont, which is “smaller, more rural, more democratic, less violent, less commercial, more egalitarian, and more independent” than its sister states?

When Naylor laid out the case for independence in *The Vermont Manifesto* (2003), the political air was heavy, sodden, statist. “Even in the best of times secession is a very tough sell in the USA,” lamented Naylor in 2002. “Since Sept. 11, it has proven to be an impossible sell.” But George, Scooter, and Wolfie, for whom Vermont is just another inconsequential state full of potential bodybag fillers, came to the rescue, putting a rebarbative face on the Empire and opening the door to radical possibilities.

In stepped the Second Vermont Republic, with a blend of whimsicality and seriousness, and its “eye-catching street theater has proven irresistible to the media, as has its exponential growth in the aftermath of the 2004 elections,” according to Cathy Resmer of the Burlington weekly *Seven Days*.

With polemical wit provided by Vermont’s Bread and Puppet Theater, the SVR has staged mock funeral processions, parades, and Fourth of July floats in which children declared their independence from bedtime, “annoying siblings,” and “my floaties.” The SVR has

even achieved a symbolic political success, persuading the legislature to declare Jan. 16 as Vermont Independence Day in commemoration of the establishment of the First Vermont Republic in 1777.

The group's seriousness of purpose is evident in its literate monthly, *Vermont Commons*, which includes contributions from the likes of Wendell Berry, Bill McKibben, and Kirkpatrick Sale on such topics as family and organic farming, community-supported agriculture, land trusts, and local currencies—constituting, in sum, a humane and practicable alternative to the Empire of Wal-Mart and Warfare. The tincture is green, but conservative, too, and although Naylor refuses to kiss up to his state's hack politicians—he calls Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy “a world-class prostitute”—the Republican lieutenant governor has praised the SVR for “their energy and their passion.”

Secessionist whispers have soured through Vermont for years. In 1990, Frank Bryan, the University of Vermont political scientist and populist author of *Real Democracy*, the definitive work on town meeting (see “Democracy in Vermont,” *TAC*, Sept. 13, 2004), stumped the state debating secession, in the affirmative, with Vermont Chief Justice John Dooley. Following each of the seven debates, citizens voted to secede.

The presidency of George W. Bush has made the fanciful seem a little less fantastic. The nascent SVR-inspired Middlebury Institute, directed by Kirkpatrick Sale, author of the classic *Human Scale*, seeks to “put secession on the national agenda.” Audacious, perhaps, but hardly a forlorn hope, for as Naylor asks, “Do you want to go down with the Titanic? No empire has survived the test of time.”

Secession is blowing in the wind. Sale and Naylor count at least 28 U.S. secessionist movements active everywhere

from those dubious Cold War states of Alaska and Hawaii to New York City—site of Norman Mailer's prophetically pro-secession 1969 mayoralty campaign—to the states of the Confederacy, with their League of the South, and up to the felicitously named State of Jefferson in northern California and southern Oregon. **America has gone fission.**

The Second Vermont Republic confounds those who would analyze it using the language of practical politics. It pursues with humor and a dogged optimism a goal that seems manifestly impossible. It speaks radical notions with a conservative diction. It operates at the political fringe yet attracts such eminent establishmentarians as John Kenneth Galbraith, who communicated his “pleasure in, and approval of the Second Vermont Republic.”

Or consider the case of George Kennan, to whom *The Vermont Manifesto* is dedicated and whom Thomas Naylor calls, without any posthumous exaggeration, “the godfather of the

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movement.” Kennan—diplomat, memoirist, the only Wise Man of the 1940s worthy of the sobriquet—had speculated about devolving the U.S. into “a dozen constituent republics” in his valediction *Around the Cragged Hill* (1993).

Nearing his centenary—he died March 17, 2005 at the age of 101—Kennan became much taken with the idea of an independent Vermont, although he told Naylor that “we are, I fear, a lonely band; until some of the things we have written are discovered by what we may hope will be a more thoughtful and serious generation of critics and reviewers, I am afraid we will remain that way.”

Kennan's secession letters, dictated from his sickbed, are pointed and poignant. “All power to Vermont in its effort to distinguish itself from the USA as a whole, and to pursue in its own way the cultivation of its own tradition,” he wrote in May 2002.

In his lengthiest discourse on the subject, Kennan wrote Naylor that in the matter of independence for Vermont and her neighbors, “I see nothing fanciful, and nothing towards the realization of which the efforts of enlightened people might not be usefully directed. Such are at present the dominating trends in the U.S. that I can see no other means of ultimate preservation of cultural and societal values that will not only be endangered but eventually destroyed in an endlessly prolonged association of the northern parts of New England with the remainder of what is now the U.S.A.”

Ah, but there is a complication. Kennan was attracted to the Second Vermont Republic partly because he deplored the Hispanicization of the United States.

Instancing Mexican immigration, Kennan saw “unmistakable evidences of a growing differentiation between the cultures, respectively, of large southern and southwestern regions of this country, on the one hand,” and those of “some northern regions,” including Vermont. In the former, “the very culture of the bulk of the population of these regions will tend to be primarily Latin-American in nature rather than what is inherited from earlier American traditions.”

“Could it really be that there was so little of merit” in the American Republic, asked Kennan, “that it deserves to be recklessly trashed in favor of a polyglot mix-mash?”

It is no small portion of Vermont's charm that the secessionists were given use of the state house in Montpelier, which lent a certain sobriety to what might otherwise have been a rambunctiously motley conference.

Thomas Naylor fretted the night before the convention that the crowd might overwhelm the two-man Capitol security force, but not to worry: the secessionists behaved splendidly, so that the officers had no duties more pressing than giving directions to the

Vermont Republic, Naylor shrugged and replied, "whatever the people decide." The SVR takes no position on abortion, gay rights, gun control, and the like; these are questions to be debated within an independent Vermont. Devolution is the great defuser of explosive issues: let Utah be Utah, let San Francisco be San Francisco, let Vermont be Vermont.

Naylor grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, but he rocked uneasily in Confederacy's cradle. He attended football games and refused to stand for the playing of "Dixie." He was a liberal who

secession. He is, like many decentralists, an American patriot who reveres the crazy old idiosyncratic America and whose heart stirs to patriotic tunes. But something has happened; the country seems to have gotten away from itself. "The reservoirs of citizenship are dried up, and that's why we've got to secede," asserted Bryan. (Lest we forget, Bryan reminded us that in many other countries of the world, "We'd be shot for doing what we're doing here today.")

The keynote speaker was that scourge of suburbia, James Howard Kunstler, upstate New York Democrat and slashingly witty Jeremiah, who predicted that "life and politics are going to become profoundly and intensely local" as the age of cheap oil slips away. Kunstler is a novelist and social critic, not a secessionist, though as one considers his prophecies and their implications—Wal-Mart will topple like a statue of Lenin; food will be grown for local markets; New England, the Middle Atlantic, and the Upper Midwest will endure while Phoenix returns to ashes and Las Vegas loses its shirt—one might be excused for thinking him a utopian.

Kirk Sale, pointing to the state motto, "Freedom and Unity," offered his good-natured anarchist dissent, remarking, "the more unity you have, the less freedom. It is disunity that allows freedom." (I had driven to Montpelier that morning with my hell-raising pal Marty Stucko and Sale, a delightful dinner companion. "Park here! Park here!" Kirk said as we passed spots featuring conspicuous NO PARKING signs. "What are you?" I finally asked, "a f----g anarchist?!")

After eight hours of small-scale democracy in action, the assembled Vermonters voted to "peacefully and democratically free [themselves] from the United States of America." You may call it a lark, but on this last Friday before Halloween 2005, I thought I saw it grow wings.

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restrooms and transmitting the request, "Will the owner of a black Mercedes please move your vehicle?" Days of Rage these were not.

The Rev. Ben T. Matchstick, a radical puppeteer, called the assembly to irreverent order with a benediction invoking "the flounder, the sunfish, and the holy mackerel." Men in business suits, white-maned Vermont earth mothers, and pony-tailed college kids wearing winter skull-caps indoors packed Representatives Hall, sitting at the desks elsetimes occupied by state representatives and filling the room with a sweet fragrance of winsome radicalism and localist patriotism.

Under a portrait of George Washington, Naylor, the founding father of this republic in gestation, charged that the U.S. government has "no moral authority... it has no soul," and he denied the salvific properties of the Democratic Party: "It doesn't matter if Hillary Clinton or Condoleezza Rice is the next president—the results will be equally grim."

Rodomontade was kept to a minimum; the gathered had plenty of "what about?" questions. Asked what would become of abortion rights in a Second

loved the Ole Miss Rebels but never for a second fell for the moonlight and magnolias myth.

When a delegate asked the inevitable Civil War question, I expected to see Naylor's long frame dance around it nimbly. Instead, he met it head on. "South Carolina and the Confederate states had a perfect right to secede," he told the assembly. He recommended Tom DiLorenzo's debunking *The Real Lincoln* and said, "the bottom line of the Civil War was preserving the Empire." I expected audible gasps and fainting Unitarians, but the unsayable, having been said, was not confuted. Would not the Empire treat a seceding Vermont with as little forbearance as Lincoln showed South Carolina in 1861? Naylor scoffed: "Would all of the black and white Holsteins be destroyed or perhaps the entire sugar maple crop be burned?"

Frank Bryan, introduced by Naylor as "hands down the most interesting person in Vermont ... since Solzhenitsyn left the state," confessed to being "sad" and "melancholy" because "my nation needs Vermont to secede." Bryan has long been achingly ambivalent about

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Vermont secession is not an "issue" like entitlement reform or prescription-drug benefits. It is an eidolon, a Vermont-specific image of the American Dream (the real dream, not the imperial nightmare) that may not concretize—what an inapt verb for green Vermont!—for many years but that has the power to fire imaginations, to inspire those in despair, to keep flying a banner to which patriots can rally. An independent Vermont is not a joke, nor is it an *ignis fatuus*; it is the shape that hope takes in the darkening shadow of a crumbling Empire.

John McClaughry, the Vermonter who heads the free-market Ethan Allen Institute, detects "a virulent anti-American leftism" in the SVR, adding, "whether this goes so far as a willingness to forswear the continued receipt of Social Security checks from the despised U.S. of A. the organizers have yet to say." Naylor responds that expatriates currently receive their Social Security checks without incident. And to the common argument that Vermont receives \$1.15 for every dollar it sends to Washington and therefore would shortchange itself by separating from the Union, Frank Bryan has replied, "Would you rather have \$10,000 to spend any way you want or \$11,500 that you have to spend as I say?"

McClaughry is a cussed original whose work I have long admired, but unless the defining characteristics of "anti-American leftism" are a loathing of Wal-Mart, the Iraq War, and Big Government and a fondness for organic farming, town meeting, and a Vermont First ethic, the SVR seems to me a whole-somely shaggy band of *ur*-Americans, not anti-Americans.

Yeah, I saw a fistful of nuts at the Montpelier convention. I kept a judicious distance from the man who stood to announce that he had once "stuck a fake knife through [his] head." There

was a collegiate white Rasta or two and a Montreal pwog who informed us that "the U.S. is based on genocide," but they were the sort of free-floating crazies who show up wherever two or more people are gathered in the name of revolution. In the main, in the heart, the Second Vermont Republic is based on love: love of a place, of a culture, of an agriculture.

I heard much talk of the need for libertarian conservatives and anti-globalist leftists to work together. There is a sense that the old categories, the old straitjackets, must be shed. When Reverend Matchstick preaches that we need decentralism because communities that ban genetically modified food must have the power to enforce those bans, he is speaking a language that

pre-imperial conservatives will recognize—the language of local control. Russell Kirk would understand. When the "Vermont nationalist" CEO of a consulting firm insists that Vermont should have the right to determine where (and where not) its national guard is deployed, I hear an echo of the Old Right. Why should the Vermont National Guard be shipped overseas to fight the Empire's wars?

"Long Live the Second Vermont Republic and God Bless the Disunited States of America," concluded Thomas Naylor. You got a better idea? ■

Bill Kauffman's most recent book is Dispatches from the Muckdog Gazette (Holt/Picador). His Look Homeward, America is due in May from ISI Books.

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