

Frank Bryan: Towards Our New Republic

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"Towards Our New Republic"

by Frank Bryan

Essay based on an address given at the October 28, 2005 Vermont Independence Convention

How final the hues of October; the orange of oak and tamarack against the hard green of the fir, the light of the leaving sun sneaking up and under from the south showing rare angles on the forest floor, the heavens heaved northward, patient and foreboding.

Driving through the colors of Vermont to Montpelier this October past to advocate for the secession of Vermont from the United States of America, I was reminded of the music of Judy Collins sung thirty years ago and the lyrics that haunt me still:

Across the morning sky
All the birds are leaving.
Oh how can they know
It's time for them to go.

Before a winter's fire
We'll still be dreaming
I do not fear the time
I do not fear the time

And in these words I found the themes that would govern the remarks I was to make that day and which I believe are essential to our cause.

For secession is a final business.

LOVE

The first of these themes is love.

I love my country. Long did it cradle my ancestors and long has it sustained me and nurtured my children. If I had to choose one nation on which to place the fate the planet it would be America. And there is this: for the action I took that October day in Montpelier I would have been shot in many capitols of the world -- Saddam Hussein's Iraq for one.

I love America for the Bill of Rights, for Normandy and Guadalcanal, for Ted Williams and Willy Nelson, for Mohammad Ali and Dotty West.

When all is said and done, we are doomed if we base our movement on hate or disgust, whether it be for President Bush or Bill Clinton, Wal-Mart or Hollywood.

On hearing several particularly vicious attacks on George Bush last year at the Middlebury Convention I thought: "What will we do? Rejoin the union if Hillary is elected?"

No. The emotion that should fill our hearts is melancholy; the sadness of a season past.

Because we have Vermont, we will be spared the stillness of a winter's fire alone. But to say we love another more is not so say that in the passions of long ago we loved another less.

COURAGE

Hate is easy. Love takes guts.

So the second theme of our movement must be courage. True courage it seems to me involves time and ambiguity. A philosopher once wrote, "Life is the art of reaching sufficient conclusions based on insufficient evidence." My friend Bill Mares says: "Maturity is living with ambiguity." Either way, sustained action in the face of ambiguity spells courage. As with love, the greater the cause, the greater the ambiguity.

Question: Do we have the guts to sustain our action in the face of doubt? What we are up to is intellectually complex. To survive we must work through that complexity over the long haul. Tom Wolfe (author of *The Right Stuff*) says that the most courageous act a human being can attempt is to land a high performance aircraft on an aircraft carrier at night. Why? Not because it takes the "Powder River let'r buck!" mentality of a cowboy bull rider, but because it takes absolute concentration on the end in sight, while fighting off the fear involved in making a dozen adjustments in your actions during which any single misstep means death. It is being careful and precise when every atom of your being screams, "Go for it!"

We can either be an organization based on easy slogans and gutless emotions like hate that we employ to cover our own insecurities – and if we don't have any then our critics are right and we ARE nuts – or we can use the right stuff. Understand, this does not mean that the movement should be "intellectualized." Hell no. Without sustained and bold action we die. But it also means, as Hemingway said, grace in the face of danger. For us grace is not a flowing cape and precise dancer's steps. It is hard and honest thinking.

Bill Clinton was a draft dodger.

George Bush Jr. was a draft dodger.

Both statements are cowardly. What we are doing is justified because the most passionate members of both the political parties that rule America subscribe to one of them and not the other. Worse, the other members of America's ruling elite don't seem to give a damn if leaders of our major political institutions thus continue to soil themselves in public.

When James Howard Kunstler nastily attacked race car drivers at the Montpelier convention he gave us a perfect example of gutless simplicity – this time (I assume) employed to ingratiate him with his audience. It should have been a learning moment for us. Hate was in his voice. I think he must have felt insecure. But why? Until that moment we were with him! Perhaps calling these kinds of people those kinds of names has become a habit for him.

Whatever the case he exhibited the importance of the third theme that flows from Judy Collin's lyrics.

HUMANITY

Question: If there were race car drivers in the audience and Kunstler knew it, would he have said the same things?

Perhaps. What if, however, he lived in a small town in Vermont (Let's say Washington or East Montpelier near Thunder Road International Speedway). Would he have made these remarks at town meeting in these towns?

No.

Such behavior does not meet the test of human scale. Life is different when you meet folks on the street, at the gas station, in the store. Playwright Jonathan Miller said it best: in order for a relationship to be humane it must be complicated and dutiful. These characteristics are learned best in communities where human interaction is maximized. I will stop and help someone who drives their car into a ditch in Starksboro not because (as Jefferson said) I am a rural person and thus one of "the chosen people of God." I will stop because I have learned over the years that because the person in the ditch may know it's my truck going by, I may have to explain to him the next time I see him why I didn't stop.

Were Kunstler a citizen of Williamstown, Vermont or Wilksboro, North Carolina, if he were not separated in time and space from the citizens of these places, if indeed they were his neighbors and not just statistics he would act differently. He would act humanely.

Thus it is that we must imagine ourselves before a winter's fire. The birds have flown south. The cold is upon us. A long winter lies ahead. And there is time – a lot of time – that we will be sharing together. For after secession, we will be alone.

The conditions of life on a human scale have for more than two hundred years fashioned the very place we seek to preserve in a new form – an independent republic, the Second Vermont Republic. This is our heritage. This is what makes Vermont special. It is not the scenery. It is not our mountains "stretching straight and true" as Frost said. It is us as we live in our communities – our small towns. It is neither the easy days of summer nor the tourist-filled weeks of autumn. We find ourselves when the colors fade into gray and then white (as Mosher says in his incandescent final paragraph of Alabama Jones.) We find ourselves when we hunker down, dig in, and see the winter through. We find ourselves when we are alone with each other.

Most of all we find ourselves in our governance. In our two-year term for governor, in our citizen legislature, in our town meetings – the planet's best single example of real democracy – of democracy as it was meant to be.

A FINAL WORD

As we work toward our independence let us never forget what drives us. We are not doing this to rid ourselves of America. We are doing this to preserve the one place that best represents what America was all about, the one place that best exhibits the values that made America great. We are doing this to re-establish a new smaller America as it was before big government and big business and big media forgot what America was all about.

Let us form a new coalition of left and right fashioned not on the opportunity for political gain, but rather an appreciation for what we have in common -- a fear of giant institutions of influence whether they be seen as under public or private control. Exxon or the Defense Department, the U.S. Department of Education or Wal-Mart, Verizon or the FCC, who cares?

The problem is size. For size precludes popular control of either public institutions or the market place.

Let us be as opposed to the governmental imperialism inward toward citizens in their states and localities, as we are opposed to imperialism outward over the markets and cultures of the world. Let us always understand that for all but the very wealthy in America, mega-bureaucracy is always totalitarian.

Above all let us be civil, tolerant, and aware of the common humanity we share with those with whom we disagree. Let us always "walk a mile in their shoes" before we criticize. For this is the way of Vermont democracy.

This means we have more to do than secede from the Union. We must sustain the passion that drove us to it. And that passion is about what Vermont is and only secondarily about what America is not.

For it is not an independent republic we seek. It is an independent Vermont republic. If we achieve the Republic and lose Vermont – what would be the point?

Listen with me, therefore, to the words of Ralph Nading Hill as he describes Vermonters in his classic *Contrary Country*.

Rebellions runs through the entire fabric of the lives of this resilient people whose ancestors first came to till a resistant soil. Perhaps because Vermont has so clearly diverged from twentieth century streamlined living, the trait of waywardness has recently been the subject of intense rediscovery by transplants and humorists, as if it were a new discovery on the landscape of New England.

But it is not really new...

Rebellion is their birthright [and] fires of rebellion, which flamed for a hundred years, have not gone out. Coals of protest still smolder in town meetings, under the dome of the state capitol and by phrases spoken by Vermont legislators in Washington...

These words are as true today as they were when they were published in 1950.

Rebellion remains our birthright.