
Principalities & Powers

by Samuel Francis

Secessionist Fantasies

Throughout the first half of the present year, “secession” became the new watchword for a growing number of people on the American right. Economist Walter Williams has written at least two newspaper columns openly advocating secession. Jeffrey Tucker of the Ludwig von Mises Institute describes secession as “the cutting-edge issue that defines today’s anti-statism,” and Tom Bethell in the *American Spectator* writes that “secession” is “the counterrevolutionary word that I have begun to hear from some of my conservative friends.” Of course, if the word were uttered only by conservatives, the normal folk of the country would never hear anything sensible about it, and what makes the revival of secessionism interesting if not yet important is precisely the fact that a good many nonconservatives are starting to bat it back and forth, occasionally even in public.

There is, for example, a movement in the Northwestern United States and Western Canada to promote at least a more autonomous regional identity for, if not actual political separation of, the area called “Cascadia”—based mainly on what are taken to be the region’s distinctive economic interests and the constraints that membership in Canada and the United States place on the pursuit of such interests. Then there was the effort of Staten Island to secede from New York last year and a similar effort by the Eastern Shore of Maryland to secede this year, in addition to the attempts of Northern and Southern California to divorce each other every year. Finally, there is the politically serious movement led by a group known as the Committee of 50 States, which promotes a measure called “The Ultimate Resolution.” This proposal would essentially fire the President, members of Congress, and federal judges if and when it is approved by the legislatures of three-fourths of the states and the federal budget reaches \$6 trillion. It is in essence a measure for secession, since it would declare, with intended legally binding force, that the existing federal government no longer has au-

thority over the states. And, on top of these several more or less serious movements, there are always the Southern flag-wavers whose fantasies about standing up to the Yankees just one more time, if they never achieve anything concrete, at least perpetuate the myth of secession as a feasible alternative to the hard work of reconquering North America from the savages into whose hands the Yankees allowed it to fall.

Secessionism of any stripe, of course, has not been a serious political movement since the 1850’s, and even then it was difficult enough for those who pushed it to get it to take wing. It did not take wing except when the election of Lincoln and the Republican Party in 1860 made it clear to the slaveholding interests of the Deep South that their predominance within a united state was entering its twilight. Elsewhere in the South secession was explicitly rejected until Lincoln, either by deliberate design or by the most colossal blunder in American history, called for the mobilization of 75,000 troops in reaction to the Confederate firing on Fort Sumter. It was thus the prospect of military invasion and conquest, and neither allegiance to slavery nor adherence to a particular view of the Constitution, that precipitated the secession of the Upper South and made civil war all but unavoidable.

What this little history lesson suggests, and what similar and less successful bouts of secessionism in American history also suggest, is that secession is typically an option for losers, a path that is taken or touted only when all others have been closed off, and not a choice that is selected because of its intrinsic theoretical merits or the bright practical prospects it offers. As for its theoretical merits, they are admittedly considerable. The theory of secession normally rests upon the doctrine of state sovereignty in the Constitution, and the circumstances surrounding the drafting and ratification of the Constitution make it reasonably clear that the Framers did not intend for the new federal government to be able to use force against the states. No such power was granted to the federal government, and three states at the time of rat-

ification explicitly reserved the right to resume their sovereignty as they chose. In the text of the Constitution it is clearly the states themselves, and not the “people,” that are the fundamental units of government, the units that are represented in the Senate, that elect the President, that ratify amendments to the Constitution.

Lincoln’s argument against secession in his First Inaugural responded to none of these points. He argued mainly from the nature of a national government (thereby begging the question as to whether the federal government was in fact a “national” government in the sense he intended), and, knowingly or from ignorance, he distorted the essence of the secessionist argument by claiming that secession would lead to anarchy, each seceding unit in time breaking up into still smaller ones because the process of fragmentation, once begun, could not logically be halted. The obvious response to Lincoln’s claim is that units smaller than the states are not sovereign and have no legitimate basis for asserting sovereignty and that units at the sub-state level such as counties, cities, or townships are themselves creatures of the state government in a way that the states most definitely are not the creatures of the federal government. Lincoln’s pseudo-argument in fact inverts the very nature of the American federalist system; designed as a system in which the federal government was created by the states, the system becomes in Lincoln’s assertions one in which the states are essentially the creatures and subordinates of Washington. But of course it was the United States government itself that violated Lincoln’s own argument when, under his presidency and for obvious military reasons, it endorsed the secession of West Virginia from Virginia once the Upper South had taken its leave of the Union and started sharpening its sabers.

Nor, apart from Lincoln’s banalities, is there much in our history, either before or after the Civil War, to suggest that the case for secession is a flawed one. New Englanders, the most ardent of nationalists when the vile slaveholders of the South sought to go their own way, were

the first to invoke secessionist pretenses on the eve of the unpopular War of 1812, and Abolitionists, always a sour crew, later proposed secession because by their own admission they were just too morally pure to remain part of a Republic that also harbored such knaves as slaveowners. As with the Southern secessionists of the 1850's and 1860, these earlier apostles of separation were losers, parties unable to persuade the rest of the country to follow the courses they demanded and unwilling to travel the route the rest of the country wanted to adopt. Probably no one has ever advocated secession, let alone been willing to die for it, simply on its own merits; almost every secessionist has chosen it because, at the time he did, there simply was nothing else for him to choose, short of the unpalatable path of abiding by the rules of the political game and shutting up.

And so it is today. The reason secession is being bruited about in the dark corners of the land, from Alaska to Annapolis and from Staten Island to San Diego, is that its partisans have simply

lost all serious hope of gaining victory for their particular causes. Those muttering about secession for regional economic reasons know very well, at least as well as Deep South slaveowners in 1860 knew, that their particular interests are not sufficiently significant to other people in the nation ever to gain the satisfaction they want and need, so that leaving the larger national political unit and forming a smaller unit that they can more easily dominate is the obvious course to take. There is no reason to be too cynical about such naked attempts to fracture the nation for the purpose of serving particular (and often private) economic interests. The fact is that such movements are commonplace throughout history, and there is no right or wrong to them. Those interests strong enough to sustain secession or independence get away with it; the others go down in history as scoundrels or as foolish romantics who bucked history's tides.

But, precisely because some evolving regional economic interests are beginning to find they can no longer gain satisfaction by remaining in the present

American nation-state, there is also beginning to be some ideological flutter about secession on the right. Here again secession is a game for losers. Those on the political right who have expressed sympathy for secession are among the best, the smartest, and the most principled conservatives and libertarians in the country, but their problem is that they, too, have basically lost. Unable to gain sufficient political support for their beliefs in the existing nation-state, they find themselves doomed to a lingering extinction if they remain within its political boundaries. The only path open to them now is secession, or at least so they imagine.

My own view is that secession—or regionalism or separatism or whatever we want to call it—is actually not a path that is open to us. It is quite true that we could conceivably succeed in mustering a movement somewhere in the United States to pull off an act of secession, though it is not at all clear who “we” are or what the seceding units might be. Assuming “we” eventually figure out who “we” are and what exactly is going to se-

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cede, if secession were to take place without violent resistance, the only hope for it would be to persuade the existing political regime to grant a right to it. A right to secession can pertain only to states—not to regions, races, religions, or ideological reflexes, which are often the proposed seceding “units.” Moreover, it is all but inconceivable that the existing national regime would ever grant any explicit right to secede from it—for the same reason that Lincoln understood. Acknowledgment of any such right is, if not a prescription for anarchy as Lincoln claimed, at least a prescription for the suicide of the larger unit that acknowledges it, and to recognize the secession of one unit or group would lead at once to recognition of every other unit aspiring to independence. What that means in practice is that those asserting a “right to secession” can never expect to gain recognition of it, that if they are serious about it they have to expect to fight for it, and that assertion of a right to secession ultimately is more or less identical to an assertion of a right to revolution. This brings us back to where we came in.

The American right is beginning to tinker with the idea of secession because the serious right, like most of the secessionists who preceded it, is now beginning to perceive that it has lost—that neither Good Old Dutch nor his all-but-forgotten successor nor any of the leading candidates for President in 1996 achieved or can achieve much of anything that the serious right wants and that there appears to be no reasonable way at this point to mobilize yet another popular political movement able to recapture the country from the forces of the left. The most that Reagan, Bush, Quayle, et al., succeeded in accomplishing was to teach the left wing of the Democratic Party how to mouth sounds about “family values,” low taxes, and patriotism and to instruct politicians of all stripes in the subtle art of holding office for more than a decade without even trying to fulfill any of the promises and principles by which they gained office in the first place.

But the sad truth is that the serious right will be unable to make use of secessionism as an alternative to political victory within the present nation-state for the same reasons it has lost the political contest in the first place. The right has lost the political contest within the nation simply because it lacks, and is generally uninterested in gaining, suffi-

cient cultural power and influence to sustain a political victory. Even when it wins elections, it lacks the power to govern, and it continually lacks the power to govern because the right refuses to understand that outside of a dictatorship you cannot govern unless you first enjoy cultural power.

What, then, would a successful secessionist system be like? Unless the right first undertakes and completes its own long march through the culture, a secessionist system would merely replicate most of the flaws, vices, errors, misconceptions, and dominant interests that now afflict the larger nation. It is easy to say that the vicious habits and interests that have brought the nation to its present pass are all located in Washington, and if only we could get rid of Washington (or New York, or Hollywood) all would be well. The truth is that corruption and oppression flourish in Washington, New York, and Hollywood because they either sprout from state and local ground or are tolerated, rewarded, and encouraged at those levels of government by the very people who are supposed to remove these wicked ways by seceding from them.

Secessionism, then, is at best one more fantasy by which the right can avoid dealing with the problems it and the nation face and doing what it has to do if it ever wants to accomplish anything more than chatter and fundraising. The American right has long been full of such fantasies, usually centered on a return to some mythical past golden age where all was well. The utopia of the past has varied from faction to faction of the right—the Middle Ages, the Old South, the *Ancien Régime*, the Gilded Age, the pre-New Deal 1920's, or (for neoconservatives) the era of Cold War liberalism of the 1950's and 60's. What the American right has never done is try to construct, slowly and patiently, an apparatus of cultural power that can challenge the corruption that now dominates the nation, attract a following from the contemporary American mainstream, and sustain whatever political efforts the right is able to undertake. Once the right wants to do that and is able to do it, then it might also be able to lead a secessionist movement that could achieve something worth achieving. But of course once the right is able to take back its culture, it won't need to follow the losers' road of secessionism anyway.

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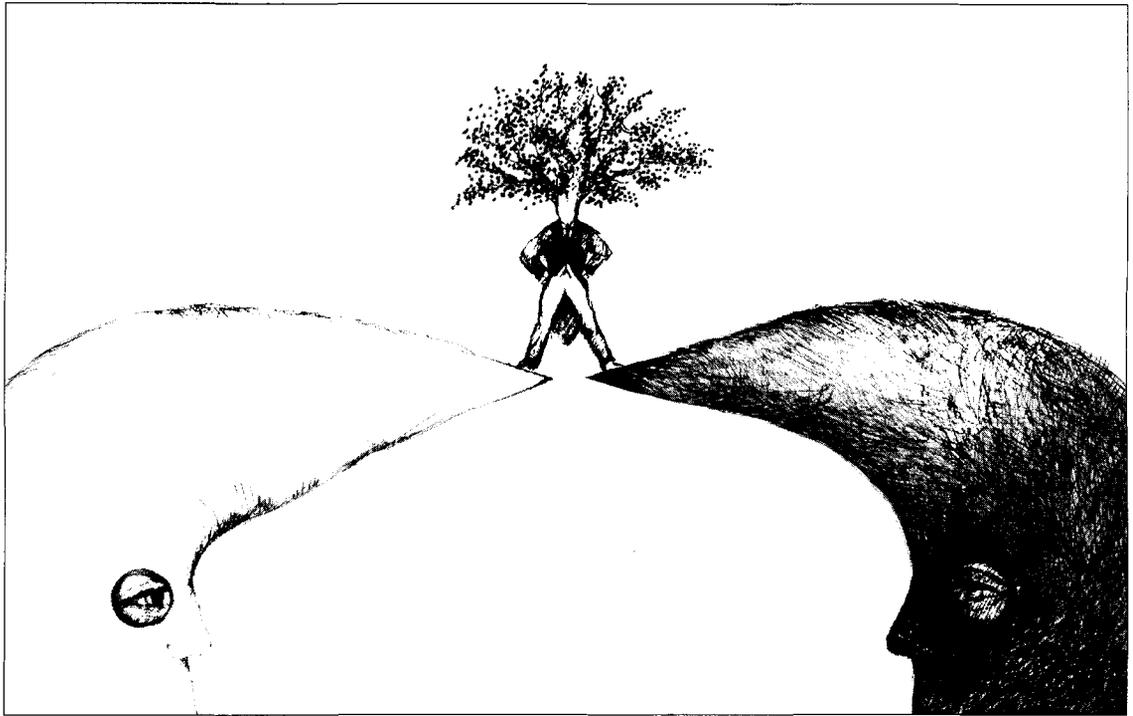


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Equality or Privilege

Gored on the Horns of the American Dilemma

by Thomas Fleming

“Everything in American politics always comes down to the race question,” says one of our collaborators. School choice plans, for example, are either condemned for enabling the white middle classes to liberate their children from the hell of public schools or praised for giving black families the prospect of sending their children to the suburbs. The war on drugs is undertaken to save “inner-city youth” from the consequences of their misbehavior and criticized for targeting minorities. When the police beef up patrols in black neighborhoods they are accused of harassment and, when they slack off, of neglect. (Throw in the homosexual rights question, and the cops are in an impossible bind, as in the Jeffrey Dahmer case, where one sensitivity blunted another.)

The race question is most pernicious in anything relating to federalism. Trying to make a case for states’ rights or local control, I am always asked how I would prevent one group (by which they always mean whites) from oppressing another (that is, blacks). At the Ludwig von Mises Institute’s superb May conference on the “Costs of War,” the panelists more or less agreed that the War Between the States was a just war assert-

ing the South’s independence. Inevitably, someone in the audience played the race card: If you believe in national liberation, does that mean you would support a slave revolt?

Different people gave different answers, all of them good, but as I tried to explain, the question is irrelevant, if not entirely fatuous. My response would depend entirely on which side I was on. If I were a slave, the son and husband and father of slaves who were revolting, I should inevitably side with my own people, but if I were a master, I should have no choice but to defend my wife and children against a mob that, if it did not kill them, would make them long for death.

Consider for a moment the history of Haiti. Admittedly, French rule was nothing so benignant as plantation slavery in the Old South, but the butchery of women and children that attended Haitian liberation was only the prelude to nearly two centuries of repression and murder, which, by comparison, makes Cabrini Green seem like Wilmette. In retrospect, the wisest and most humane political leader in Haitian history was Papa Doc Duvalier, who employed both physical and meta-physical terrorism in a disciplined campaign to keep his tur-