

POLITICS



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## Going It Alone

by Frank Bryan

### The Case for Vermont's Secession

As the high lunacy of the 1990 budget negotiations showed, America's federal arrangement has been replaced by a confederation of special interests that have less in common than the former colonies — or even, perhaps, than the states that comprise the United Nations.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 reimpose power; 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 shoring up its parts, preserving union by emphasizing disunion, making cosmopolitanism

possible by making 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 applies 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 2052 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, soon after seven of seven Vermont 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 up 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 the 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 trashed 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 nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people." Is there anyone left in America today over the age of six who does not understand that the reserved power clause has become a joke? The author of a leading college textbook puts 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 underdeveloped capacity for self-restraint." Just this year Vermont decided it was hopeless to pursue a case 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 money* from us. These are called "crossover sanctions." In the 1980's Ronald Reagan, in an act of mind-wrenching hy-

poetry, convinced Congress to withhold highway repair funds from states like Vermont unless we raised our drinking age to 21.

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There is no state in the Union as historically predisposed to secession as Vermont.

In his book about Vermont, *Contrary Country*, historian Ralph Nading Hill recalls storyteller Walter Hard's memorable Vermont character, Grandma Wescott. Once curiosity got the better of her and she went to a revival meeting. After a long-winded sermon, the traveling preacher approached the audience, sweat oozing from his brow. When he reached Grandma Wescott's seat, he bent over and beamed encouragingly: "Sister, are you a Christian?"

"Not in this church, I ain't!" she snapped.

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

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 those things nations did in those days—coining money, raising armies, engaging in foreign relations. We joined the Union free and clear in 1791, the 14th state.

Sort of. We sat out the War of 1812, our beef cows feeding the British army in Canada—a move we can remind our northern neighbors of during secession. We also ignored the Fugitive Slave Act. Vermont Supreme Court Justice Theophilus 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 Fenians who attacked Canada from Franklin, Vermont. United States marshals had been sent to Vermont to halt the process. We ignored them. In 1917, before America declared war on Germany, Vermont did so, in effect, by appropriating one million dollars (real money in those 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 taxes instead of issuing bonds to pay for it!

In 1927 the worst national disaster in the state's history struck. After the flood, Vermonter Calvin Coolidge offered federal help. Replied 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 down 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. Said historian Ralph Nading Hill: "In 1941 Vermont declared war on Japan before Washington did."

No state, including Texas, can

match Vermont's independence. Still, to think about secession conjures up the worst kind of imaginings. But they are false fears.

*Vermont is too small to be a nation again.* Sitting in the United Nations today are the representatives of twenty-five nations with populations smaller than Vermont's. Each of these nations has voting rights in the General Assembly equal to those of the United States of America. More importantly, small nations have been asked to sit on the Security Council. Guido de Marco from Malta, representing a nation with two-thirds the population of Vermont, was elected and is now serving as president of the 45th General Assembly.

*Vermont's tiny economy would be swallowed up by giant international trading systems.* In actuality, it is becoming evident that small nations have great advantages in the international marketplace. Gary S. Becker, the highly respected University of Chicago professor, writes (in an October 1, 1990, *Business Week* article): "Bigger isn't necessarily better . . . Smaller countries tend to be more nimble traders in international markets, offsetting their lack of economies of scale."

Vermont products have always had a special mystique. They are prized outside Vermont as much as for what we are as for what they are. If anyone thinks Vermont ice cream or Vermont maple syrup or Vermont cheese would suffer if Vermont became the Switzerland of North America needs to read an introductory textbook in marketing.

*A little state like Vermont is too dependent on the federal dole to go it alone.* Question: would you rather have \$10,000 to spend any way you want or \$11,500 that you have to spend as I say? Two things stand out in the debate over Vermont's return on its tax dollar from the federal government. One is that this return is much smaller than most people believe. A fair estimate is that we get back \$1.15 for every dollar we pay in. The second is that even this small positive ratio is on the decline.

When one considers the hassle one must go through to get that extra 15 cents on a dollar (grant applications, dealings with the federal bureaucracy), the benefit of federal money may already be nil. Add to this the fact that

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 one dollar 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 payback is borrowed money. In order to give us back \$1.15 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 buck 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 built under the National Defense Highway Act. We paved 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 sled-dogging it over the polar 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 at no expense to the Republic will be enough. American tanks rolling into Bennington? It'll never happen. All we have to do is simply assert 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 benign neglect during the War of 1812 and to a province of that country with secessionist ideas of its own.

"It takes big government to solve big issues": the Star Wars argument. My opponent in the secessionist debates, Vermont Supreme Court Justice John Dooley, stated that "Acid rain 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 progress 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 to shame," 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 1970's.

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.