Eat Locally: Growing A Statewide Localvore Movement
By Robin McDermott

It was two years ago this past August that a small group of women in the Upper Valley (the White River Junction/Hanover NH area) decided they would try eating only local food for the month of August. Inspired by a group who were doing something similar in San Francisco who called themselves Locavores, the Upper Valley women decided to call themselves Localvores (with an “l” in local) and started a food movement that has changed the way Vermonters are eating in just two short years. Last summer, it is estimated that more than 1,000 people across the state of Vermont took the EAT LOCAL Challenge. While this year’s numbers are not yet in, the Localvore group in Burlington is predicting 1,000 participants in their area alone. New Localvore groups have sprung up across the state and range from large groups in Burlington, Montpelier, Rutland, and Brattleboro, to groups of just a handful of participants in smaller towns like Brookfield.

The New England Secession Tradition
PART III
By Donald W. Livingston

In this issue we present the final installment of Professor Livingston’s three-part series discussing the roots of a New England secession tradition. Readers can find Parts 1 and 2 in the Spring 2007 and Summer 2007 issues of Vermont Commons, or on the web.

The Convention of 1814-1815. This decade-long movement was not a revolution, but a lawful action legitimated by the Constitution. How so? As Jefferson and Madison taught, the Constitution is a The first serious secession movement began in New England in 1804 and culminated in the Hartford compact ratified by sovereign states. As a sovereign party to the compact, each state has the right and duty to protect its citizens from an unconstitutional act of the central government by nullifying it, thereby forcing a decision by the other sovereigns on the constitutionality of the act. And as a last resort, a state can secede from the Union. This constitutional right

continued on page 20

Fall on the Web

- John Dowlin on “State of Emergency: Bringing Home the VT National Guard”
- Carl Emier on “Peak Oil: Vermont’s Virtual Planning Forum
- Don Livingstone’s “New England Secession Tradition” – Downloadable PDF
- Your cards and letters
- NEW! “U.S. Out Of Vermont” T-shirts

Join the Conversation: www.vtcommons.org
to subscribe to our free electronic newsletter, contact webeditor@vtcommons.org
Editorial

U.S. Out Of Vermont: Long Live the “Untied States”

Last June, the Associated Press’ Vermont Bureau ran a news story entitled “Vermont Independence Movement Gains Traction.” Picked up by the national news wire, the article, written by Bureau Chief John Curran, made its way around the world via the Internet, prompting words of encouragement and ridicule, condemnation and support, from citizens all over the world.

And at Montpelier’s Riverwalk Records on State Street, one of the season’s hottest-selling items became a simple black T-shirt reading “U.S. Out Of Vermont.” Despite the steep price – $20 each – the store sold more than 500 of them this past summer alone.

“U.S. Out Of Vermont.” How to explain the popularity of such sentiment?

Some of the energy is faddish, no doubt, while other left-leaning Bush-bashers reflexively point to, as a primary cause, the past seven years of “King George” and Vice President Cheney’s Beltway reign.

But “U.S. Out Of Vermont”? This from a state that has enthusiastically contributed, to the rest of the country, Ethan Allen’s defiance, John Deere’s plow, Ben and Jerry’s ice cream, Robert Frost’s poetry, Joseph Bentley’s science, Grace Potter’s music, John Dewey’s pedagogy, and more pancake syrup than you can shake a maple limb at! This from a state that has willingly sent its own sons (and now daughters, too, in the Iraqi desert and Afghan mountains) to fight and die on behalf of America since the independent republic of Vermont joined the United States in 1791?

Perhaps the citizens of Vermont, along with the rest of the world, are beginning to realize that the United States is no longer the democratic republic it once was.

Indeed, as Americans, we are now citizens of an Empire ruled by an ever-more-powerful military/industrial/media/energy complex.

And the problem, the tragedy, of the United States is one of scale. We are simply too BIG.

We are a nation where each member of our House of Representatives is supposed to represent more than 635,000 individual citizens. We are a country where even state and local elections are now (mostly) conducted via computerized touch screens controlled by proprietary corporate computers. We live in a surveillance state, where all of our daily transactions are increasingly monitored, collected, and destroyed by a faceless few whose identities we seldom know. We move in the midst of what former Bush I HUD regulator Catherine Austin Fitts, writing for Vermont Commons (Summer 2006), calls an imperial “tapeworm economy,” a system created by an unholy alliance between the captains of D.C.’s beltway and the captains of industry.

What’s hot now, in our globalized 21st century world, is what author Naomi Klein refers to (in her new book) as The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism – simply stated, the “shock and awe” creation of stupendous profits by the very few through exploiting the misery of the many.

This includes war-making and counter-“terrorism” efforts (increasingly confused as the same thing), and the profiting from other disasters: real (Katrina), imagined (Avian Flu), or manufactured (9/11).

This is what the U.S., as an Empire, has become, as we enter the 21st century.

And no amount of big-heartedness, generosity, or good will – qualities that actual working Americans of all political stripes possess in spades – will turn the ship of Empire away from a rendezvous with destiny, in the form of climate change, global Peak Oil, an endless war (“on terror”), global financial meltdown, and the fruitless (though very profitable, for some) pursuit of an imperial policy of “full-spectrum dominance” – America the Colossus attempting to bestride the entire world, and (no joke) outer space, too.

Unless

Unless we “untie” the United States.

U.S. out of Vermont. And Kansas. And Florida. And Mississippi. And Ohio. And California. Indeed, citizen movements in no fewer than 25 other states are exploring secession. Vermont is not alone here.

The “United States.”

But where do we start?

We start where we live. And work. And play.

We’ve been exploring this question for more than two years now, in print and online.

Here’s a short list:

We start with “homestead security”: inventing new forms of renewable energy to power our homes, our workplaces, and our communities.

We start with “food sovereignty”: learning how to grow, harvest, and store our own food again, and supporting our struggling family farmers all over the country who are doing the same.

We start with “people power”: re-inventing local and mass transportation systems that use less energy more efficiently.

We start with genuine financial freedom: collectively investing in local economies and local currencies. The Berkshares project, Ithaca Hours, and our own Burlington Bread all provide models and lessons for what works and what doesn’t.

And this list is just a beginning.

Ultimately, untying the Empire in this new century will not begin in the D.C. corridors of power, or corporate shareholder meetings, or the control rooms at CNN and FOX news.

It will begin, not with the U.S., but with us.

U.S. out of Vermont.

Long live the “Untied States.”

Rob Williams

Editor

Contributors

Keith Davidson is a cartoonist, musician, and handyman who lives in Vermont’s Mad River Valley, where he tends bar at American Flatbread restaurant.

Erik Esckilsen lives in Burlington, where he teaches college writing and writes novels for young readers, short fiction, and screenplays.

Richard Foley, of Brattleboro, is a professor at Keene State College in New Hampshire, where he has taught energy policy and technologies for the past 25 years.

The Greenneck’ lives and writes in the rusted-out shell of a one-ton Chevy pickup somewhere in Cabot.

Donald Livingston is professor of philosophy at Emory University, whose latest book is Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium, Hume’s Pathology of Philosophy (University of Chicago Press). He is currently writing a book on the moral, legal, and philosophical meaning of secession.

Robin McDermott is a co-founder of the Mad River Valley Localvore Project. She and her husband, Ray, operate their business, QualityTrainingPortal, from their home in Waitsfield, where they also grow much of their own food.

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Rob Williams is a teacher, historian, writer, and musician, and is associate publisher and (web)editor of Vermont Commons. He lives in Waitsfield.

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Letter to the Editor

Another Perspective on “The Greenneck”

Editor, Vermont Commons:

So, the “Greenneck” recognizes but “doesn’t care” about “the contradictions” (for example, between having solar panels on his house and also having a too-big engine on his Chevy)? The Greenneck, then, by this example from his column in the Vermont Commons Summer 2007 issue, is amoral; his recognition of the contradiction in his behavior is worthless.

What a real “greenneck” would recognize, and accept, is the extraordinary difficulty of aligning his deeply held values and his actions, and the near impossibility of achieving a perfect alignment. But he keeps steadily plugging away at it; the contradictions in fact continuously pester him.

A greenneck is fiercely committed to family and community self-reliance, and independence as far as possible from a culture rooted in thoughtlessly and carelessly doing permanent violence to the land and its creatures (while he understands and generally accepts the short-term, and not lasting, violence inherent in providing for oneself, as in hunting, or slaughtering domestic animals for food). A greenneck wants to see his own and his neighbors’ “skill sets” ever expand, knowing that to the extent that one’s true needs (food, clothing, shelter, tools, and so on) are supplied from distant places, to that degree one is not free (and not secure). And he always has a vegetable garden, and his family takes care of a small orchard. Somebody he knows can repair chainsaws, if he can’t do it himself, and somebody else nearby is a welding wizard, able to fix any busted piece of metal. The guy down the street can shear sheep, and there’s a woman who doesn’t live too far away who can turn a 500-square-foot plot of flax into five linen shirts, no problem. In fact, in a real greenneck sort of place, there are enough skills to rebuild a civilization (or to survive peak oil, climate change, and the dissolution of the Union).

A greenneck shaves his head at people who don’t how to do anything, who haven’t a clue how to provide anything needed for themselves. He wonders with a mixture of pity, scorn, clue how to do anything, who haven’t a clue how to provide anything needed for themselves. He wonders with a mixture of pity, scorn, and bemusement how most people can be happy buying everything. And then he gets back to work.

Because if there’s one thing the greenneck respects above all else (besides honesty and thrift), it’s plain hard work. He himself spends much of his life sweaty and dirty – and rather unattractive, no doubt, to the tourists who roll through his town. On the rare occasions he has to travel, he looks in amazement at the clean hands of the other people in the airport or the highway rest stop (as his own seem permanently soiled), and in absolute astonishment at the long fingernails of many of the women there – those of his own wife are country-short – and he realizes that those women don’t do anything real. And then he wonders if all those folks will be heading to his town in desperation in a decade or so, and whether they’ll have anything useful to offer in exchange for his know-how. In his darker moments he wonders if he might have to use his hunting rifle to protect his family and land from ravaging gangs coming north out of a crumbling Boston or New York.

The greenneck is generally a reluctant activist. He admires and has enormous respect for Bill McKibben’s unwavering commitment to truth and to action on climate change. But a few years ago when he heard the guy, during a talk he gave at UVM, jokingly say – apparently as an excuse for not growing much food himself – “I have a black thumb,” he thought to himself, “That’s bullshit. Anybody who really wants to can have a decent garden. He’d just rather be writing books and speaking before audiences.” Which is more or less okay, as the greenneck would certainly rather be planting beans, which are almost definitely going to produce a sackful of food, than jetting all over the continent trying to convince fairly stupid people that all hell really is coming soon to a summer near you, and knowing that most of them just won’t get it. The greenneck likes results. But he does head to the Statehouse when necessary. And he’ll share his beans with Bill.

The greenneck is plenty worried, however, by the big-picture calamities coming along. And he’s plenty appalled by the pathetic state of preparedness even in rural Vermont. Surveys from the road suggest to him that maybe 20 percent, at best, of his townspeople are putting anything into their mouths that they themselves have grown or raised. And he’s all for Community Supported Agriculture, and some of his best friends have shares in the year-round CSA run by the big organic vegetable grower in town. But what’s going on? Those friends have plenty of land of their own. He thinks to himself that a CSA is maybe just another sort of consumerism, buying what you could produce yourself, because you don’t want the hard work and like most other people would rather be “recre- ating,” and your connection to the roots of life is withered even though you live in the country. The CSA share doesn’t actually do anything to empower and build the confidence and self-reliant skills of the CSA member. It’s just another purchase (albeit enlightened and righteous).

The greenneck has been around for a long time. Back in the day, he might have been called an agrarian. But it doesn’t matter to him much what word is used. What matters is the land.

Jeff Ricket
Craftsbury
The term Localvore no longer needs to be defined when you use it. Articles across the country have reported on Localvore activities, often citing San Francisco and Vermont as the origins of the movement. Personally, I get at least one call a week from a TV station, newspaper, or magazine asking about the Localvore project. So rather than reporting on what the Locavores are, I would like to share some stories about what this fledgling movement has done in its two short years of existence, and what needs to be done in the future to maintain the momentum.

Increased Sales for Vermont Farmers

Farmers across the state have reported booming sales this summer. Mad River Valley farmer Dave Hartshorn of Santa Davida Farm says that his sales have exploded this year. Everything he brings to the Waitsfield Farmers Market on Saturdays is sold and savvy shoppers know they need to get to the market early to get the best selection. Another Mad River Valley farmer, Hadley Gaylord, who is a diversified farmer and has a herd of 250 beef cattle, reports that he is selling all of the beef that he has. While the problem for farmers used to be selling their products, the problem now has become keeping up with the growing demand for the local food that they provide. This is great news for young people who are interested in farming. It gives them hope that they are getting into a career with a real future!

The Return of Forgotten Crops

In the 1800s the Champlain Valley was the breadbasket of New England. Yet today very little wheat is being grown in Vermont. The UVM Agricultural Extension Service and some Vermont farmers are exploring ways to bring wheat back to Vermont. A fascinating article about the project appeared in The Times Argus in mid-August. It turns out that the “father of wheat breeding”, one Cyrus Pringle, born in 1838, hailed from East Charlotte. Three of the wheat varieties he developed were named Champlain, Surprise, and (my favorite name) Defiance. According to Heather Darby, UVM coordinator for the project, “Defiance was the most famous of all three and the most widely adapted across the United States.” The article reported that Defiance was the variety most widely grown in Washington State where most of the country’s wheat is grown, from the late 1800s into the early 1900s, and is a parent of many varieties used today. Large-scale wheat production could be returning soon to Vermont. Several test crops have been grown throughout the state this summer and area bakers are eagerly awaiting the results.

Local Food Shortages

Dried beans, popping corn, and sunflower oil are ingredients that many Locavores will have to do without during the September challenges this year. While these items were available this time last year, they are now highly sought after and when they hit the grocery store shelves they move fast. While the food shortages are a disappointment to Locavores, they encourage farmers to expand their crops. Just about every farmer I have met in Vermont says the same thing: “Prove to us that you want something and we will grow it for you.” When a farmer runs out of something that used to last the entire year, it sends a strong message — “We want more!”

Increased Awareness of Food Rights

This year’s agriculture viability omnibus bill that was signed by the governor in late May got a lot of people talking about their right to good, local food. The bill became known as the “chicken bill” because one part of the bill made a significant change to the existing poultry processing regulations. After George Schenk of American Flatbread bucked the system and threatened to serve “uninspected” chicken from a neighboring farm in his restaurant in June of 2006, people who previously knew nothing about the poultry-processing regulations were talking like experts, arguing for or against the change in the law. I know that I never really wondered where chicken I was served in a restaurant was from or how it was raised until I got involved in supporting their right through the program of Rural Vermont. The big message with the passage of the “chicken bill” is that consumers have a RIGHT to decide what they eat. Providing they have the facts, let the eaters decide what is good for them and what isn’t. More than 400 people showed up at American Flatbread in Waitsfield for “Chicken Event 2” in June to eat the now-legal chicken-topped flatbreads and to celebrate the passage of the new law.

Spotlight on Vermont

Vermont is quickly becoming a model for other communities across the country. Articles about Vermont’s Eat Local scene have appeared in the Boston Globe, the New York Times, and most recently The Nation. There is not a week that goes by that I don’t get a call from someone outside of the state wanting to do an article on the success of our local food movement. But, more important than the spotlight, is that other communities are being inspired by what we are doing and are taking up their own Eat Local efforts. As much fun as it is with Vermont being the leader in the Eat Local movement, if other, bigger states don’t follow we will never break the hold that the industrial food system has on what we eat nationwide.

Broadening the Localvore Community

Even with the great participation we have had in the Eat Local Challenges this year, it accounts for a small number of residents in the state. As a truly grassroots effort with no budget and no full-time staff, the Localvore leaders in the state have had to get creative with how we get the message out. In mid-July several state leaders including Governor Jim Douglas, Secretary of Agriculture Roger Allbee, and House Speaker Gaye Symington took the Eat Local Leadership Challenge. Speaker Symington took the challenge very seriously and baked bread using all local flour to share with her colleagues. Others ate vegetables they had grown or meat from wild animals they had hunted last season.

By getting high-profile people to participate in the challenges and getting creative with other events, the Locavores are getting their message out and at the same time hopefully educating influential people who can spread the Eat Local message to a broader audience.

So What’s Next for Local Food?

Locavore groups throughout the state will continue holding the Eat Local Challenges as they have been for the past two years. The Challenges are a fun way to help people learn about our continued on page15
The Great Hydropower Heist
How Corporations Colonized Our Watershed Commons
The Historical Context for Understanding Vermont’s Electric Power Industry

PART TWO OF A TWO-PART STORY

By Dr. Richard Foley, Hervey Scudder, and Lee Webb

In Part I of this essay (published in the Spring 2007 issue of Vermont Commons), we deconstructed the initial invasion of investor-owned utilities (IOUs), focusing on the Connecticut River Power Company, which in 1902 launched a brilliant bait-and-switch marketing campaign that paved the way for the corporate takeover of one of the crown jewels in the Vermont “Commons,” the Connecticut and Deerfield rivers. Damming large portions of the watersheds, the company gutted much of the decentralized local power capacity while exporting the vast majority of the dams’ output south and east to the New England grid’s large metropolitan and mercantile customers.

As the second half of the Hydropower Heist story will show, for the next 100 years a stream IOU “raiders” relentlessly continued their invasion of our state, building more dams and snapping up dozens of municipal electric utilities. The aggressive energy moguls solidified their holdings to the point that by 1930, 95 percent of Vermont’s consumers were held hostage to out-of-state IOUs that owned 99 percent of the electric power plants in the state. Vermonters paid “through the nose” for electricity. Worst of all, nine out of 10 Vermonters would never get electric power on their land.

Turns out that all Vermonters, not just the folks in Windham County, have been sold down any number of “rivers.”

The Fox Guarding the Hens’ House: Who’s Regulating Whom?

Before continuing with the story of the damming of what was known as the “Great River” and the related saga Vermont’s 100-year struggle against investor-owned electric utilities, we need to look at how IOUs were positioning themselves to control as much as possible (and profitable) of Vermont’s electric generation, local distribution, and regional transmission infrastructure.

We should start you off with one little question. Are you under the impression that the Vermont Department of Public Service (DPS) and the Public Service Board (PSB) exist to represent your interests and those of your fellow Vermonters? Are they independent, public agencies appointed, in 1912, a Commission on the Conservation of the Natural Resources of the State of Vermont to look into the matter. After all, the public implications of hydroelectric power were enormous. The construction of reservoirs and dams on both rivers (the Connecticut forms Vermont’s boundary with New Hampshire, while the 71-mile-long Deerfield courses from south-central Vermont into Massachusetts and its eventual terminus at the Connecticut at Greenfield) flooded thousands of acres of farmland, villages, and roads.

The commission slammed the Power Company on two counts. First, along with other IOUs, the company was raking in huge profits on its exported power. Second, it was failing to extend service to its local Vermont customers; in a classic example endemic to the “resource curse,” the Power Company was exploiting a natural and “indigenous resource” and refusing to share with the “indigenous people.”

The commission recommended that the state control the export of electric power, much as Maine had banned exports in 1909. But the combination of the company’s and its IOU allies’ lobbying efforts and public-relations campaigns persuaded the Legislature to ignore the recommendations.

A few years later, spurred on by public outrage of the Vernon and Deerfield dams rip-off, the PSB made a second attempt to implement state regulation of exports. The Power Company challenged the order in federal court, which, in turn, ruled in 1919 that Vermont, or any state for that matter, had no jurisdiction over such interstate commerce such as export contracts. We might add here that at this point in time the federal government lacked jurisdiction. The court’s ruling rendered the state powerless to enforce the “public interest” intent of the original Connecticut River Power Company charter.

Many analysts agree that these watershed decisions triggered the longstanding, ongoing battle over Vermont’s electric power exports.

The Weasel Guarding the Hens’ House: Big Brother Knows Best

To supplement their control over the regulatory process, IOUs turned to their corps of savvy, arm-twisting lobbyists to influence the state Legislature and administration. To disarm public inquiry, IOU dollars and influence-peddling found ready collaborators in local newspapers. If that strategy proved problematic, they could always count on the emergence of the new breed of regulator – the federal government’s multi-tentacle control over interstate commerce.

For example, the issue of exporting homeowner, cutting-edge renewable electricity at the turn of the last century. As the Connecticut River Power Company’s electrical power flowed south and east from the Vernon dam and the Deerfield River system of dams, the Legislature finally appointed, in 1912, a Commission on the Conservation of the Natural Resources of the State of Vermont to look into the matter. After all, the public implications of hydroelectric power were enormous. The construction of reservoirs and dams on both rivers (the Connecticut forms Vermont’s boundary with New Hampshire, while the 71-mile-long Deerfield courses from south-central Vermont into Massachusetts and its eventual terminus at the Connecticut at Greenfield) flooded thousands of acres of farmland, villages, and roads.

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IOU Raiders Invade the Rest of Vermont

If southern Vermonters first fully experienced the “resource curse” that currently bankrupts developing countries as outside interests exploit and export their resources to the detriment of the environment and indigenous populations, their fellow Vermonters soon found themselves in a century-long struggle with a ravenous pack of IOUs.

The decade of the 1920s literally lit up America – demand of electricity doubled every few years – and ushered in the IOUs’ ruthless campaign of monopoly and Enron-like manipulation, corruption, and outright thievery. By 1929 IOUs had bought out the lion’s share of Vermont’s patchwork of municipal and small private utilities and thereby controlled more than 90 percent of the electricity generated and about 75 percent of the power distributed in Vermont.

Colorful rogues abounded – like Chicago mogul Samuel Insull, and the infamous Minneapolis-based duo of Forshay and Ohstrom. By 1929, Samuel Insull’s Central Vermont Public Service...
offers a model for our own action. I have always hoped that our film would introduce a larger audience to his work. That is our success.

DM: I think we show his great humanity. I thought Howard would be this angry guy, but instead he was this charming and very warm person. He taught me that one can be angry at the injustice that exists in the world but retain a sense of humor.

What inspired you to make your next project?

DM: I am a working-class guy and have been interested in antiwar veterans for a long time. Deb found this wonderful story about the Patrick and Jill Hart that cuts to the bone, so we decided to do it. It is a logical progression for us. We have made a film about the FBI attacking social movements, and a film about Zinn, so to make a film about a social movement in progress and a very personal story seemed perfect to me.

DE: In June 2006, Denis and I attended an event in Buffalo, New York, and Erie, Ontario, called “Peace Has No Borders.” [It] was an amazing celebration of solidarity and support for U.S. war resisters who had chosen to refuse to go to Canada rather than be deployed to the Iraq theater.

Before the event, I did some article searches to find out about the organizers, and the resisters. Very few people in the States were aware of the growing stream of resisters going to Canada. I was very interested in the implications of such a significant decision being made by such young men and women. When I found Jill and Patrick Hart’s story in a Buffalo paper, I wanted to know more. Patrick Hart was a nine-year member of the Army. He had spent a year in Kuwait and was about to be deployed to Iraq. He decided to go to Canada, and made the decision without telling his wife. He knew she would turn him in. Jill now confirms this. When she had known, she would have turned him in. Today, Jill and their son have joined Patrick in Canada. We have spent time with Patrick and Jill over the past year and a half, following them through their application for immigration, and their move from ardent “new” resisters to being a family living and growing in a new country.

Since meeting Patrick and Jill, we have come to know many of the resisters, and their support community in the U.S. and Canada. We have become interested in the transmission of generational memory between the Iraq War resisters and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. We are also interested in the use of art and performance in the resistance community. These threads are winding together.

Have you always been interested, as a filmmaker, in films dealing with social and political issues? What do your film roots look like?

DE: I have always been awed by the ability of film to convey incredible emotion. So, it seemed natural to use film as a way to talk about social issues. I grew up under the influence of photographic essays –Life magazine, The World of Man, et cetera. So, I gained a lot of my entree into the lives of others through immersion in photographs. I had a sense of the power of images, and I think that fueled my interest in film.

DM: I was overwhelmed by Barbara Kopple’s great film Harlan County USA. I also am a child of the ‘60s and love film. It just seemed to me to be a way to combine my politics with art.

How does your work as the Vermont International Film Festival (VIFF) board president, and de facto artistic director, fuel that interest?

DE: I would say it works the other way around. It is my interest in the power of bringing people together around films that fuels my interest in working with the festival. Every year, my hope is that the festival can provide a venue for community experience and discussion. This year I am particularly excited to have a lineup of films that express the experiences of people from around the world, such as Banakto (dir. Abderrahmane Sissako, Mali/USA/France, 2007), in which African civil society proceedings against the IMF and World Bank take place in the courtyard of Melé, a bar singer, and her out-of-work husband, Chaka. Manufactured Landscapes (dir. Jennifer Baichwal/Canada/2006) follows acclaimed photographer Edward Burtynsky to China as he captures the effects of the country’s massive industrial revolution and leads us to meditate on human endeavor and its impact on the planet. Other films include War Dance (dir. Sean Fine and Andrea Nix/USA/2007), about the journey of three former child members of Uganda’s Lord’s Resistance Army who make it to the finals of Uganda’s national music and dance competition. Strange Culture (dir. Lynn Hershman Leeson/USA/2006) is about the surreal nightmare of internationally acclaimed artist and professor Steve Kurtz accused of being a “bioterrorist.” And there’s more, including an incredible run of Vermont films. One of the Vermont films is Jeff Farber’s Living on the Fault Line, about the intersection of family dignity and racial injustice in the experiences of Vermont’s transracial families.

It is an honor to work with the staff and board of the festival, and numerous supportive community members, to bring these films to a Vermont audience. I am looking forward to another year of films, conversation, and incentive to work to make the world a more peaceful and sustainable place.

continued on following page
How does a film festival like VIFF manage to present substantial, issue-oriented films while avoiding a sense that the festival program is politically “heavy” or dogmatic?

DE: We have an incredible range of work we show. For example, this year we'll be screening a film called Havana Blues (dir. Benito Zambrano/Spain/Cuba/France/2005), a captivating love letter to life on the “crazy isle” of Cuba. The film follows a group of musicians – not the Buena Vista Social Club – struggling to make it big time. The festival has a point of view, in the sense that we choose films we feel are important. We want to make sure we have films for many audiences. There are a lot of ways filmmakers can speak to an audience.

Back to Peace Has No Borders. What will audiences find most surprising or intriguing about the subject of war resistance as you are covering it?

DE: I hope they will understand that Iraq is not about a failed mission – it is, of course – but the real point is the problem is much darker. I hope we can get the audience to understand that if we only think in those terms we will be in another war with the same consequences. The other thing they will find surprising is that the resisters like Canada and want to stay there.

DE: I think the other thing that our audience will find intriguing is the consciousness of the resisters. These are people who have made a decision to fight against a war they believe is immoral, and often, they have found extremely creative ways to express their resistance.

What are some of the challenges that you have faced in making the film?

DM: Right now it has been money, as always, and finding the time to get to Canada. I am sure there will be many more. (laughs)

DE: Money and time! What else stops people with a passion to make a film? Otherwise, we’re set.

What would you say are some of the most exciting changes afoot, either technologically or culturally, for independent filmmakers?

DM: I think that there are more outlets for independents. We are still drops of water compared to the ugly hurricane of the mainstream, but it is improving.

DE: I guess I’m not sure that more outlets mean more opportunities for serious independent filmmakers like us. Who knows? On the other hand, I think we now have more ways to interact with our audience from pre-production through distribution. How independent filmmakers take advantage of this opportunity is key.

I’m most interested in story. I think we get too tied up in technology. There are always new technologies, and they always offer more resolution and promises. It’s important to know how to interact, but ultimately, it’s about story. If we have a good story, we can get it out. It’s a lot of work!

What’s the next film project on your horizon?

DE: We’re working on the next film on the horizon! I have limited vision beyond what I am immersed in at a particular moment! There are always a few little projects festering, and maybe I’ll have the time to finish them now. I’m so happy to be at UVM, close to home and in my community again. I counted the time I’ve spent in my car driving over the past five years and it equals the equivalent of 97 days, if I was driving 60 miles an hour the entire time. That’s too much time in a car! I can’t believe how many people I’ve run into in the last few weeks, just riding the bus, walking my bike, living my life. I’m encouraged by the possibility of time.

You’re also a film teacher, so what advice do you, or would you, give to an aspiring indie filmmaker who wants to change the world with movies?

DE: My advice to all students who want to become filmmakers is to find out a lot about the world that has nothing to do with filmmaking. Find something you are passionate about. Discover new worlds and people. Experience – THEN come back to filmmaking. To change the world, you need to understand the world. Film becomes a way to talk about what you know. I see too many students who want to emulate what they see at the theater rather than thinking about what they really have to say—and I mean “have to say.” Unless you have something you have to say, there is no purpose. This doesn’t mean you have to make didactic films that tell the world what to think. Rather, it means you’ve taken the time to be passionate enough about finding a way to express what you care about most. Take the time! And believe in your experience.

DM: Make your art an art based in experience. By that I mean, not your experience or mine, but an experience that is based on the world in which we live. The other thing is to have the courage to not have an agenda. This does not mean one does not have a point of view, but allow your film to grow in an organic fashion, and learn from your characters.
Here is an example of what can happen when the idea of secession gets talked about these days. This is a selected version of a blogpost article on secession that was introduced earlier this year, as well as some of the responses. Secession is a hot topic, the need is great, and citizens are beginning to recognize its viability.

—Kirkpatrick Sale, Director, Middlebury Institute.

The link: www.picasodreams.com/picasso_dreams/2007/08/a-simple-soluti.html#comment-78542794

August 05, 2007
A Simple Solution – Secession
By Kelly Ann Thomas
I do not understand how it is that the majority of Americans understand that their government is lying, stealing, torturing and killing in their name, and yet few people act on their convictions. They continue to pay taxes, they continue to support the corrupt system, they continue to deploy to Iraq, and they allow fraudulent elections repeatedly.

There is no escaping the financial collapse of the US economy. There is no solution to Iraq [other] than immediate withdrawal. The US infrastructure is ancient. Our oil refineries are old, bridges and buildings are on the verge of collapse, and a few more hurricanes and earthquakes will be enough to shut down the economy.

We all say we want a peaceful revolution, but I don't see much revolution. Protests don't work – they only give the Homeland Gestapo opportunity to photograph you and put your face in a database. I don't think there are many people who refuse to pay taxes. Not enough that it makes a difference.

A friend suggested a general strike. I don't think it will work, because too many people would be afraid to expose their beliefs to their boss, employer, neighbors, coworkers, family and friends. Especially the work force. With the economy sailing the way of the Titanic, most people cannot afford to lose their jobs. It's like an episode of the Twilight Zone, where 1984 meets Brave New World, and Soviet-style communism collides with German fascism. I think I hear Caesar calling.

And they have won. It is 1984. The tyrants have enslaved a population to such an extent that there is nary a peep. All the underground talk about V for Vendetta, yet few have done anything to stop tyranny. So, what happens now?

In my view, the only peaceful way to end this tyranny is if all the states secede from the US. No more PATRIOT Act, no more dismantling of habeas corpus, and no more bodies in Iraq.

The only peaceful way to end this tyranny is if all the states secede from the US. No more PATRIOT Act, no more dismantling of habeas corpus, and no more bodies in Iraq.

People wonder what would happen if Medicare and Social Security ended. Medical care would get a whole lot cheaper and natural medicine would become mainstream. By not spending half their income on taxes, people would have more money for their future. If someone gambled it all away, snorted it up their nose, or lavished themselves with luxuries, that was his right – and his personal responsibility – to handle the consequences. If we were personally accountable for our actions, fewer people would engage in wasteful behavior. Without government telling us how to spend our money, we could decide which charities or causes to support. If I want to donate to help with someone's health costs, I will. If I see George W. Bush passed out on the sidewalk, I have the right to not contribute to his recovery program. At present, we are conditioned to demand the government solve our problems. With bailout after bailout, it's easy to understand why the masses aren't worried. The Knight in Shining Armor is at the gates of the fortress because Hollywood tells us it is so....

Bush is about to unleash a nuclear war and no one seems to care. This is why I felt the need to leave the US. I just don't believe enough people care. It's easier to slap a global warming bumper sticker on your car than it is to stop a government from murdering its own.

Whether people like it or not, they must choose. Support a nuclear war or do something. I wish I could do something to stop this madness. No one person can do it. If we don't work collectively now, we will all be working in Halliburton-built collectives much like the Soviet and German prisoners....
any shadow of a doubt that any States that assert rights to themselves will not be tolerated.

One other solution is to have a President brave enough to dismantle his own government; this is why Ron Paul is so very dangerous and why he is being hamstrung by the media... because he might actually do it.

Posted by: ShadesOfKnight | August 06, 2007 at 09:11 AM
You might be on to something here. Others agree: http://vermontrepublic.org/

Posted by: bonanzaman | August 06, 2007 at 10:38 AM
Secession is the only answer for a gov’t that continues to violate our rights:
• They violate the 1st Amendment by opening mail, caging demonstrators and banning books like “America Deceived” from Amazon.
• They violate the 2nd Amendment by confiscating guns during Katrina.
• They violate the 4th Amendment by conducting warrant-less wiretaps.
• They violate the 5th and 6th Amendment by suspending habeas corpus.
• They violate the 8th Amendment by torturing.
• They violate the entire Constitution by starting 2 illegal wars based on lies and on behalf of a foreign gov’t.
Support Dr. Ron Paul or force secession.

Posted by: Director | August 06, 2007 at 03:33 PM
Bravo! you have some great ideas

For more information on the growing global secession movement, visit www.MiddleburyInstitute.org.

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The Food Less Traveled

By Enid Wonnacott

W hen I heard Michael Abelman speak in Vermont last year, there was one statement he made that I have returned to frequently throughout the year: “Pleasure is a better motivator for change than guilt.” He continued, “How do we provide an invitation, rather than a harangue?”

It is hard to determine what thing or combination of things motivates social change. This is a question that traverses disciplines, whether studying educational change or political change. I have been interested in motivations for behavior change throughout my academic and professional careers—most recently, what will motivate kids to make different food choices in school, and how can we most effectively impact child eating behaviors?

School food change has gained so much national attention, not because of the pleasure children will experience when they pull their first carrot out of the ground, but because of the increased incidence of Type-2 diabetes and obesity. What determines which foods a second grader will choose when he or she gets to the end of the lunch line? Most likely, it will not be the school nurse’s voice or their parent’s voice or the memory of something they read; more likely, their decision will be influenced by the experience they have had with that food. Did they help plant those cabbage seedlings in their school garden? Did they visit the farm and help harvest those potatoes? Did they prepare a taste test for their peers in their classroom?

The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT) has worked with Food Works and Shelburne Farms for more than 10 years on a collaborative project called Vermont Food Education Every Day (VT FEED). A focus of the project is to change the palettes of Vermont youth, so that when they get to the lunch line, they can choose food from farms in their community and they will choose those foods. It has always seemed commonsensical that if a school is within walking distance to a farm—as many are in rural Vermont—those schools should have a food-purchasing relationship with those farms or at least other Vermont farms.

Due in part to VT FEED’s work, and to communities that were working on these efforts before VT FEED came along, there are now 75 schools out of Vermont’s 300 public schools that are integrating the math, history, and science of local farms into their curriculum and purchasing local food for their lunch line. I love that I can eat lunch at the Brewster Pierce Elementary School in Huntington that the farmer has songs written about the world.”

In our goals of influencing the food choices of children and adults in Vermont, we have to consider all of Vermont, and make sure that all Vermonters have access to fresh, local food.

Food communities

When adults think about their food choices, what is motivating them? For individuals to experience food through growing, harvesting, preparing or developing a relationship with that food and food producer.

The organization leading the crusade toward a new food culture nationally is Slow Food, “a non-profit, eco-gastronomic member-supported organization that was founded in 1989 to counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions, and people’s dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world” (according to its website).

I was fortunate to attend Slow Food’s Terra Madre in Turin, Italy, last fall. Accompanying the event was a celebration of regional foods called the Salone del Gusto, where small-scale food producers come from all over the world to showcase their products. The event is dedicated both to excellent food and to the extraordinary people who produce it. At the Salone I tasted wines from the Piedmont Valley and prosciutto from Sienna (not to mention the molten chocolate). All of these foods have a history and a story. A focus of the Slow Food event was to celebrate food traditions, to recognize foods unique to a region, and to create a connection to a place through the foods of that place.

One of the speakers at Terra Madre was Davia Nelson, a National Public Radio correspondent working on a program called “Hidden Kitchens,” a series that explores how communities come together through food. Davia spoke at the Terra Madre about her experience visiting and chronicling all kinds of American kitchen cultures. She said that “America is in need of a movement; there was a peace movement and an environmental movement, and now we are in need of a food movement.”

Similar arguments have been made during the current Farm Bill debates. Michael Pollan recently wrote that most Americans are not engaged in the...
continued from previous page

process of creating the Farm Bill, that many people don't know a farmer nor care about agriculture—but we all eat. He recommended that "this time around, let's call it the Food Bill."

Of course, Vermont is different, in that most Vermonters know farmers, and most Vermonters care about agriculture, but it begs the question, "How would our agricultural system be different if our country created a Food Bill or a Farm and Food Bill every five years?"

As with other massive pieces of legislation, it is hard to get individuals engaged in the process of commenting on sections of the bill, calling their congressional representatives, or understanding the finer details. Having conversations with my peers about the Farm Bill reminds me of trying to engage individuals in the finer points of NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement). These are omnibus works that are hard to experience by individuals. NOFA-VT decided to go to where the people are this summer and have discussions about some of the details of the Farm Bill—we have tabled at places such as Hunger Mountain Coop and the Addison County Field Days. But, of course, the Farm Bill is not just about farms; it is about programs that impact farmers and reauthorization for nutrition programs that reach many Vermonters. And in our goals of influencing the food choices of children and adults in Vermont, we have to consider all of Vermont, and make sure that all Vermonters have access to fresh, local food.

I am particularly inspired by a project I have worked on this summer (with excellent organizational partners) to increase the capacity of farmers’ markets to accept electronic food stamps. The project was supported by a USDA grant (which was authorized through the 2002 Farm Bill). Farmers’ markets in Vermont do not have the technological capacity to accept food stamp benefits, now that those benefits are electronic and no longer issued as paper coupons. Basically, by providing wireless swipe machines to three pilot markets this season (Winooski, Brattleboro, and Bellows Falls), the markets are now able to accept EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) cards or debit cards. This is significant because the federal Food Stamp Program provides more than $4.5 million per month in food benefits to low-income Vermonters, none of which were being captured by local farmers because Vermont markets did not have the capacity to accept those food dollars. With successive expansion of the program, not only will farmers’ markets be more accessible to lower income populations, small farmers in Vermont will benefit from increased sales and develop relationships with individuals in their community that they did not reach before. Again, it just makes common sense to circulate food dollars, as much as possible, within our local communities. The project gives terms such as "community economic development" and "relationship marketing" new meaning to me.

Farmers’ markets provide an opportunity for food consumers to purchase food directly from the person who grew that food. Every individual who visits a farmers’ market is engaging in a pleasurable food experience. Most people don’t think about their experience in those terms, but that is what brings us back to a farmers’ markets or motivates us to renew our share in a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm, or plant our own garden to nourish our family. We are predominantly motivated by pleasure. And because Vermont has more farmers’ markets and CSAs, per capita, than any other state in the country, then I guess we can argue that we have the greatest capacity for pleasure!

Localvore

The energy of the Localvore movement in Vermont confirms that Vermonters at a very grassroots and community level are harnessing our capacity for pleasure using food as a medium. Localvores are individuals committed to eating food produced within 100 miles of their home. Localvores are individuals committed to eating food produced within 100 miles of their home. They serve as examples of the emergence of a local food movement throughout the country.

In Vermont there are Localvore pods organizing in communities to change and support each other to eat local foods for a day, a week, a month, or throughout the year. These learning communities are operating at a much more complex level than just planning for their meals for the week. In the Mad River Valley (www.vermontlocalvore.org), when a farmer’s barn collapsed last winter due to the snow load, the Localvores held fundraisers, supplied meals for the family and organized work crews. And in Brattleboro, Post Oil Solutions (www.postoilsolutions.org) is organizing a Localvore challenge and engaging the community in issues of climate change and peak oil

The Localvores meet quarterly to analyze Vermont’s food transportation and storage infrastructure, to identify crops that we need in greater supply (grains, beans and oil crops), and to share community-outreach efforts.

Although many regions in the country are having the "local or organic" debate, fueled by high-profile stories challenging the emergence of organic food in Wal-Mart and questioning the ethics of consuming food that has been transported so far when a consumer could buy those same products more locally. Vermont, fortunately, does not have to spend time on that discussion. The history of the organic movement in Vermont is a story of small farms, developing an infrastructure for local food sales and "food for the people, not for profit." In Vermont, organic is synonymous with local. And although NOFA-VT was not founded to promote the organic Twinkie or organic coca-cola, there are sound reasons to support the transition of multi-thousands of acres to organic production to meet the demand for organic processed products.

Vermont consumers don’t have to debate whether to buy an organic strawberry or a local strawberry, organic wheat or local wheat, organic cheese or local cheese. We can have both. Let’s debate more meaningful topics, such as how we build a vital food culture in Vermont? How can we support all Vermonters having positive food experiences that influence their consumption and purchasing decisions? If I were creating an agricultural testament for Vermont, the first testament would be "Know Thy Farmer." •
As the Greenneck emerges from a long, dark cocoon of work, he feels compelled to reflect on a summer that seems to have slipped through his fingers. To be sure, there were accomplishments beyond the mere exchange of words for money. He ran fence, with the intent of containing his cows so that he might not spend any more of his evenings chasing them through the forest. He shoveled innumerable spadefuls of composted cow shit onto the gardens. He walked into the woods with a can of gas and a chainsaw, and walked out with an armload of cedar posts. He fit windows to the openings in his new porch, for the most part well enough that they opened and closed with ease.

And now, looking through his office window over the lay of his little farm, the Greenneck sees a certain comfort. The meat birds and a steer, fattening nicely on pasture. A winter’s worth of hay in the barn. A woodshed so full the floor sags. It’s a cozy list, a reminder that no matter what else happens this winter, none will go without.

But there were little of the activities that once defined the man. The longest bicycle ride of the summer, to date: 2.5 hours. The number of mountains climbed: 0. Times gone swimming: 2.

To be sure, there will be more warm days to come. But already, a chill is in the evening air. Already, the GN has turned his attention fully to the seasons to come. When one chooses to live on and with the land in a climate of changeable seasons, one is always looking forward, preparing for what is to come. In August, that means firewood (should it have been done in May or June? You’re damn right it should’ve. But it wasn’t). The old saying about firewood, that it warms you three times – once when you cut it, twice when you stack it, and thrice when you burn it – can seem absurdly understated when you’re cutting and stacking on an 80-degree August afternoon.

Not that he’s complaining. At some point along the way, cutting firewood became so compelling to the GN that he chose to forgo a bike ride just to put up another half-cord. At some point along the way, he decided he’d rather spend a Saturday working on a barn than climbing a mountain.

There are times he regrets these choices; times he yearns for that feeling that only comes of riding hundreds of miles each week, when pedaling a bicycle feels more natural than walking. Such a mark of devotion. But then, so is stacking firewood in August.

The Greenneck did one other thing this summer: He attended a memorial service for a neighbor who died rather unexpectedly at the age of 52.

Do these things connect? They do. Because you cannot attend a funeral without considering, at least for a moment, what you want your mark to be on your little corner of the world. At least, the Greenneck cannot.

And this is what he thinks: We are no longer a nation of producers. By and large, most of us earn our living on the whims and wants of others. Very, very few of us make anything that is an absolute necessity. Most of the time, the Greenneck is no different; his words might occasionally entertain and inform, but they fill no one’s stomach. Riding his bicycle might bring a smile, or a certain self-indulgent satisfaction, but none beyond the Greenneck will benefit.

But over the past few weeks – indeed, in the weeks to come – he actually made something. He may not have made it well, but even that truth doesn’t diminish the pleasure of it. Nor does it diminish the knowledge that when his time comes, should it be tomorrow, or 50 years from tomorrow, he will have left behind something tangible, something that endures beyond the limits of his too-humble body.

For more Greenneck musing, visit www.wickedoutdoorsy.com
Independent media, like independent bookstores, are key to keeping diverse and relevant voices heard. I was sad to see the demise of the “Vermont Guardian” newspaper, which provided a weekly dose of news, information, and opinion that fostered considered discussion. But Vermont still has a number of independent media sources that we can support and which enrich us regularly. WDEV radio is one great example. Although we don’t get it down my way, I have discovered it lately and am grateful for its eclectic mix of programming. It is programming for real people, not focus groups from corporate headquarters. WTSN in Brattleboro, WBTN in Bennington, VPR, and others also keep us rooted and informed.

We still have some good independent newspapers in Vermont, too. The Rutland Herald and other ers provide us with materials that keep us informed about our neighbors, our state, our world. Civic engagement requires an informed populace. And having independent sources for our information that aren’t serving distant corporate overlords with concerns that are irrelevant to Vermonters is important and shouldn’t be taken for granted.

A study in Austin, Texas, revealed that more than three times the amount of money stayed in a town when it was spent at the local bookstore as opposed to a chain. Studies in Illinois and Maine back up this finding.

Local “assets”

In the 21st-century bookselling world, many books have become commodities. The same book can be bought in California or Vermont or Texas. It can be bought at a price club, by mail order, online, at a big box chain, at a specialty store, or at a local independent.

Does it matter where a reader gets this book? Does the transaction have larger implications?

It’s interesting to look at these questions in light of the “Local First” campaigns spreading across the country. Dozens of towns, cities, and states are sprouting alliances of locally owned, independent business with the aim of raising people’s awareness of the value of looking locally for goods and services. (See www.localfirstvermont.org for information about Local First Vermont.)

The primary argument tends to be that spending money locally keeps money in the community, thereby strengthening it. The multiplier effect works to keep money circulating in a community many times over if it is spent at a locally owned business. This makes sense, as these companies all have local staff, lawyers, accountants, and suppliers. Their owners and managers are here, not in a far-off corporate headquarters. A study in Austin, Texas, revealed that more than three times the amount of money stayed in a town when it was spent at the local bookstore as opposed to a chain. Studies in Illinois and Maine back up this finding.

But there are many other reasons to support local businesses. Stores located in downtowns – as many locally owned, independent businesses are – tend to use fewer public goods and therefore fewer tax dollars. For instance, a study in Barnstable, Massachusetts, found that a big box retailer “generated” a net deficit to the town of $468 per 1,000 square feet, whereas a specialty retailer produced a net annual return of $326 per 1,000 square feet.

Locally owned businesses draw tourists, too. I was told that a recent survey of tourists indicated that one of the primary reasons they come here is because of Vermont’s distinctiveness. They don’t want to shop at the same stores they have back home. In an increasingly homogenized world, communities that preserve their one-of-a-kind businesses and distinctive character have an economic advantage.

Also worthy of note is that small businesses give more to nonprofits than big businesses do. In fact, small businesses give more than twice as much per employee as large firms do. As most of the job growth in the country is from small business, this is important to communities.

There are numerous reasons that independent business alliances and “Local First” campaigns are resonating with Americans. Not least is that local ownership ensures that important business decisions are made locally, by people who live in the community and who will feel the impacts of those decisions.

In Phase 6 of the Vermont Job Gap Study (www.vtvtliablewage.org) it was estimated that Vermont residents and businesses exported cash to the tune of $16 billion a year for goods and services – more than $26,000 for every Vermonter.

There is a compelling case to be made that diverting dollars that would normally flow out of state to local businesses makes economic, social, and even environmental sense. As the economy limps continued on page 14
continued from page 13

along for working people, gas prices fluctuate, and the insecurity of perpetual war festers, the intuitive aspect of this argument is gaining traction with people from all walks of life.

We are connected

For me, these arguments hold substantial truth. However, I also worry about the loss of the intangible human connections that are created, nurtured, and celebrated in an environment rooted in knowledge of a particular place. There are no studies to assess the quiet damage to society as we lose our gathering places, our community centers, and our bookstores.

Or perhaps there are.

In Bill McKibben’s recent book, Deep Economy, he traces studies of human happiness over the decades and how our happiness has related to increased consumption. It turns out that while gross domestic product per person has tripled since 1950—while we have created the first society of mass affluence in the history of the world—our stated level of happiness has stagnated. According to Americans, more and cheaper and faster are not necessarily better. McKibben points to local economies, rooted in community, as essential elements of a healthy 21st-century society.

Because the impacts of spewing CO2 into the atmosphere are not included in the price of electricity, because the impacts of buying insurance from a gecko are not included in the price of insurance, because the impacts of shipping vegetables 1,500 miles are not included in the price of produce, we can live our lives ignoring our connections to the larger world and each other. But it is all too obvious now that we are connected, that we are interrelated in ways ecological, economic, and spiritual.

At first blush, or with certain filters on, it can appear that the localism argument is one of isolationism, but it is actually one of interconnection. Pretending we are isolated beings who should live our lives maximizing our individual utility by sourcing goods and services at the cheapest rate is silly (and suicidal). The age of individualism is running into the web of reality. The fragility of sourcing our energy, our goods and services, and our food from afar are apparent. The need for oil drives foreign policy, the tendency toward big and cheap empties our downtowns, the international flow of food poisons us. So localism just advocates paying closer attention to the way the fundamentals actually work, to the fact that there are implications to how and where we spend our money.

These implications are not abstract; they are about what you see when you walk down your street, they are about who you interact with during your day, they are about whether you have to travel in your car for half an hour to get diapers or a chainsaw.

David Korten, in his important book The Great Turning, has this to say: “Imperial societies maintain their dominator structures by consolidating control over all three spheres of public life—economic, political, and cultural—thus limiting people, families, and communities to whatever options the institutions of Empire find it in their interest to offer. Having little control over their lives and struggling to make ends meet, people withdraw from active engagement in civic life, causing the creative problem-solving capacity intrinsic to a vital community life to atrophy from neglect. The basic framework for the birthing of [an alternative] is simple: make life-affirming values... the values of the prevailing culture; renew the democratic experiment to restore to people, families, and communities the power to give expression to those values.”

Having access to independent media and bookstores is vital to furthering conversations about what life-affirming values Vermonters cherish and how to promote these in the “spheres of public life” that will shape our future. Vermont can provide leadership to the country in this endeavor, for whether we secede or not, we can help articulate a positive, possible vision, and help make large-scale change happen. •

The view from the Green Mountains looking west toward Lake Champlain reminds us that (as Ethan Allen famously exclaimed, borrowing from Biblical tradition), “The Gods of the Hills are not the Gods of the Valleys.” CREDIT: BEN FALK
continued from page 4

state’s ability to feed itself. Most people have become very complacent eaters, giving little thought to the food they are being served. As long as it is fast, cheap, and tastes reasonably good (often thanks to lots of fat, sugar, and salt) most people seem to be happy. But, the transformation from a mostly all-local diet of 100 years ago to one where virtually nothing local ends up in most people’s grocery carts these days has been a slow boil. As a result, most people don’t see what has happened. In a sense, the challenge can shock people into the reality of how dependent we have become on food from far beyond the borders of our state. But once the awareness is there and the demand for local food is growing, there is a lot more that needs to happen in order for the state to be able to meet the growing demand for more local food.

We Need Farmers and Farmers Need Land

Pete Johnson of Pete’s Greens in Craftsbury says that Vermont “can feed itself,” but in order to do that we are going to need more farmers – and those farmers need land.

In the Mad River Valley where I live it is impossible for a young family interested in farming to purchase land. Only two of the six farmers who come to our farmer’s market have farms in the Mad River Valley. We are fortunate that farmers are willing to travel to our market because all of them sell just about everything they bring to the market each week. The demand is clearly there. Without these out-of-town farmers, not all of the people in our town who want local food would be able to buy it. What happens when our out-of-town farmers get more demand for their food in their home towns of Peacham or Tunbridge?

Pete’s Johnson’s vision of the local food system in Vermont is that towns and villages become more self-sufficient in feeding themselves. Pete imagines that someday his market area will shrink and people or organizations will see a business opportunity and add another important piece to the local food puzzle. Ansel Zevon did just that, and after more than a year of planning and fundraising opened LACE (Local Agricultural Community Exchange). LACE, located in Barre, sells local produce, vegetables, meats, cheeses, eggs, and other local foods, and also has a café and a community kitchen where food is put up for the winter and people can learn about food preservation.

As with the greater need for farmers and land, we also need a complementary infrastructure to support more local food production.

Infrastructure

If Vermont is going to be able to feed itself year round, we need to build an infrastructure that will support that. Some farmers are able to store their own produce for the winter, but most cannot. Perhaps instead of thinking of winter storage as a responsibility of the farmer some enterprising people or organizations will see a business opportunity and add another important piece to the local food puzzle. Ansel Zevon did just that, and after more than a year of planning and fundraising opened LACE (Local Agricultural Community Exchange). LACE, located in Barre, sells local produce, vegetables, meats, cheeses, eggs, and other local foods, and also has a café and a community kitchen where food is put up for the winter and people can learn about food preservation.

As with the greater need for farmers and land, we also need a complementary infrastructure to support a more local food system. The Vermont Department of Agriculture encourages Vermonters to substitute 10 percent of the food we “import” into Vermont with local products. It has been estimated that this would result in $376 million in personal earnings from 3,616 jobs. There is a lot of opportunity out there for people who want to help rebuild an infrastructure for local food.

Changing Our Way of Thinking

We need to retrain ourselves to eat more seasonally. Rather than pressuring farmers to consider costly greenhouses, or worry about runnning farms in warmer climates in the winter to ship food back home to Vermont, we need to change our way of thinking. Being a Localvore means more than participating in an Eat Local Challenge once or twice a year; it means changing the way we think about the food that we eat. While last year I considered giving up salad greens in the winter a sacrifice, this year it will simply be a way of life.

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outranked all the other IOUs and local producers combined, with more than 50 percent of Vermont’s consumers beholden to the CVPS monopoly. By 1928, Forshay and Ostrom had purchased six power companies and merged these assets into Green Mountain Power, which controlled power to 48 of Vermont’s 220-plus towns.

Meanwhile, starting in 1921 the Boston-based Connecticut River Power Company doubled the generating capacity at Vernon to 48,000 horsepower, and a few years later added the Searsburg and Harriman dams to boost the Deerfield River system to 125,000 horsepower. But in 1926 the company was reorganized as New England Power Association (eventually known as NEPCO) and folded into a Russian doll of holding companies, ultimately controlled by a new ownership group dominated by the International Paper Company. International Paper rapidly compiled a new utility empire and orchestrated the construction of the 60,000-horsepower Bellows Falls dam (one of New England’s largest at the time, 1928), followed by the 300,000-horsepower Fifteen Mile Falls on the upper Connecticut in 1930 – the largest in New England and the fourth-largest in the United States.

Those how tout the clichés of current wisdom – “economy of scale,” “the efficiency of centralization,” and “let the market decide” – should study the IOU track record in Vermont: the financial fraud of corrupt corporations, their interconnected layers of operators, vendors and holding companies each skimming off profits; the inept technical performance marked by excess generation, poor load factors, and duplicated transmission.

Century of Consolidation: Beware of Corporatists Bearing Gifts

We could sum up the next 70 years of out-of-state IOUs versus Vermont consumers with the adage “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Once the IOUs consolidated their holdings, they worked hand-in-hand with the Republican Party (Vermont was effectively a one-party state up until the 1960s) to control the chronically under-funded state regulators. When regulators did attempt to do the right thing by responding to consumer complaints of high rates and lack of service, the Republican-controlled administrations and legislatures authorized regulators to hire “outside industry experts,” who validated the IOUs’ cooked books and their series of requests for rate increases.

Second, as we illustrated in the first part of this essay, the original IOU raiders simply morphed into modern “corporatists” as the federal government — starting with the Civil War – systematically stripped states of their original powers to issue charters of incorporation and to enforce corporations’ obligation to serve the public. Vermont IOUs simply caught the tidal wave of corporate influence over federal governance and found additional leverage in the evolving, but never clearly articulated federal national electrical energy plan that bolstered IOU control over a national transmission grid drawing power from ever-larger, centralized power plants. Vermont’s IOUs emerged after WWII as small players in the nationwide organization of the corporatist big boys — regional IOUs that had successfully enconced the electric utilities as protected monopolies, largely under self-imposed “federal supervision,” but still responsible parties in nego-

Because Vermont had been saddled with an IOU-dominated public-utility infrastructure based on IOU and federal collusion (from abuses of eminent domain to the failure to meet consumers’ needs), Aiken feared that the feds would flood even more valuable agricultural land and short-change consumers. Ironically, Aiken’s aversion to early federalized power projects based on hydropower translated into his reluctant support of the federalized “peaceful-use-of-the-atom” and eventually the construction of the Vermont Yankee atomic (nuclear) power plant on the Connecticut River.

In the 1940s, Republican Gov. Ernest Gibson proposed a Vermont State Power Authority to import and distribute a portion of the 2 million kilowatts of low-cost hydropower from the massive St. Lawrence River project. Under the leadership of CVPS President Albert Cree, the IOUs worked with the more conservative wing of the Republican Party and their common allies in the press to defeat the prospect of Vermonter benefiting as original investors in this low-cost power source.

In the 1950s the issue reverted to a lesser opportunity: what entity – a public power authority or an IOU — would access the St. Lawrence power? Again, the IOU-Republican team headed by Gov. Joseph B. Johnson, Brattleboro State Sen. Robert Gannett, and the ubiquitous Cree, successfully battled for IOU access to the power through a new IOU, VELCO (a consortium of Vermont IOU’s headed by CVPS), to deliver the power to Vermont.

Thirty years of IOU control netted Vermonter continued high electric rates (despite the St. Lawrence contributions) and fewer job opportunities as Vermont industries migrated south to take advantage of the lower rates offered by TVA and other federal public-power authorities.

The 1960s largely consolidated the IOU control of generation, transmission, and distribution within Vermont. For the third time, Cree and the Republicans (led by insurance tycoon Luther Hackett and Richard Mallary, Speaker of the House and ultimately Cree’s successor as the CEO of CVPS) beat back the Democrats’ attempts to access inexpensive hydropower from Canada – the proposed massive Dickey-Lincoln dam on the St. John’s River and the Passamaquoddy Bay project.

Two big payoffs orchestrated by the IOUs – for our collective benefit, of course – arrived in the 1970s. One consisted of multiple contracts for hydropower from – Surprise! not from the dams on the Connecticut and Deerfield rivers, but from the massive 10,000 megawatt (MW) Hydro-Quebec project that set records, according to well-researched sources, for the amount of earth moved, environmental degradation, and ill treatment of indigenous populations. Vermont’s IOUs agreed to high prices (in the 10 cents/kilowatt-hour range) in return for secure contracts that continued on following page

Looking at a Vermont map, one can see the the great hydropower heist at work, as out-of-state corporate interests capitalize Vermont’s hydropower/energy commons and bleed it dry to enrich their own private bottom line.
The other gift has proved more permanent. In 1972 the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Station went online, its majority owners – Central Vermont Public Service and Green Mountain Vermont – publicly basking in the glow of the soothing slogans promoting the peaceful atom, electric power “too cheap to meter,” and safe, clean, economical spent nuclear fuel recycling and waste reduction. The Atomic Energy Commission’s (AEC) – a particularly aggressive expression of the “military/industrial complex” – deployed teams across the globe to promote nuclear power plants and to find utilities and industries willing to build them. This powerful federal agency “convinced” Vermont’s reluctant IOUs (CVPS and GMP) that if they didn’t build an atomic plant in Vermont, then AEC would find outside investors who would.

As a result of AEC’s coercion, Vermont’s IOUs and regulators found themselves negotiating relatively minor issues like rates, while the feds (AEC /NRC) monitored the life-and-death matters of radioactive waste storage, license extension, and overall safe operation of an atomic power plant.

Since the New Millennium, Vermont’s regulators, in combination with an IOU-friendly Republican administration and federal agencies, have gifted Vermonters two disasters: the failure to step up to the plate during the bankruptcy-induced sale of the Connecticut and Deerfield river dams (Canadian-based transnational, TransCanada now owns the dams), and the creation of a permanent radioactive dump on the Connecticut River.

After almost 30 years of “running” Vermont Yankee, the consortium of original owner/operators headed up by CVPS and GMP found the combination of rising operating costs, the closing of sister “Yankee” plants, potentially problematic regulatory action, under-funded decommissioning reserves, and an uphill battle to recover stranded costs through rate increases, outweighed their financial capacity. So in a bold move our home-grown IOUs decided to sell the plant to the highest bidder. With the Public Service Board’s blessing, one of the corporatist big boys, Entergy – a $14 billion, 14,000-employee Louisiana-based giant – purchased Vermont Yankee in 2002. Entergy simply had the investment capital and nerve (unlimited funds for public relations) to go where Vermont’s IOU’s feared to tread – to resuscitate the old reactor based on a controversial three-part plan to boost reactor power to 120 percent, extend the plant’s operating license, and construct outdoor dry cask storage to make room for hundreds of tons of radioactive waste.

Although the Legislature may have one more shot at denying the license extension, both state and federal regulators have agreed to all three conditions and pushed Vermont into the permanent radioactive-waste-dump business.

True to their IOU-written script, Vermont regulators supported the sale and subsequent expansion of atomic power on the Connecticut River based on VY’s present and future contribution to the state’s electricity supply (chalk up one for the corporatists), while the Canadian company that owns the Connecticut and Deerfield River dams exports more than 80 percent of that “contribution” (chalk up two for the corporatists).

Or, put another way, if the state owned the dams Vermont would instantly reach the current goal touted in Montpelier — “20 percent energy independence by 2020.”

Who’s regulating whom? Who benefits?

To quote historian Lee Webb: “In every major battle over regulatory policy, the private utilities [IOUs] effectively used their political power, legal expertise, and public relations programs — all paid for by Vermont electric users — to defeat supporters of stronger public regulation and public ownership.”

Respect for the Small: Size Does Matter

Do we have any choice in where we get our electricity, except from IOUs? The Douglas Administration has already selected the “more big-bad-business-as-usual” option that translates as additional dependence on the status quo, the fossil-fueled, IOU-dominated New England power grid.

So what can we Vermont citizens do? The answer is certainly not to leave it up to the current editions of the governor or the Legislature.

“In every major battle over regulatory policy, the private utilities effectively used their political power, legal expertise, and public relations programs to defeat supporters of stronger public regulation and public ownership.” — historian Lee Webb.

The heroes will be well-informed, principled, and motivated citizens, taking responsibility individually and collectively. We will play champion to our all our Commons – the water, air, forests, as well as our manmade infrastructures serving the public good. We will restore the respect for the Small.

Here are five mindsets.

1) Yankee Frugality Old-timers know this one: Don’t use as much electricity. Although conservation and increased efficiencies don’t eliminate the need for some basic level of supply, the cumulative impact of a collective effort minimizes dollars sent to IOUs and releases monies for local investment. The unique, award-winning conservation utility, Efficiency Vermont, has led the way in helping Vermonters cut demand to the point that conservation, efficiency, and new renewable supplies have met our growth in demand despite the incredible pressure resulting from modern “consumer conveniences” (electrical-intensive appliances, information/entertainment systems) and commercial growth over the past decade.

2) Yankee Ingenuity More and more Vermonters have been installing solar, photovoltaics (PV), wind, and small hydro systems to supply their homes and businesses (Vermont leads the country in PV systems per capita). The combination of awareness of climate change, access to more reliable and cost-effective technologies, as well as financial incentives (combination of federal and state grants) have made these direct investments a less-pricey option; and like conservation, these energy dollars stay longer in Vermont.

3) Stay-out-of-my-way attitude Innovative business and institutional leaders selected “captive” co-generation technology — power plants burning various fuels to produce both electricity and space heat to meet their internal energy needs. For example, Brattleboro’s Bob Johnson designed and built the state-of-the-art Delta Campus around such a co-generation concept to fuel his 120-employee optical filter operation. The generators running off British diesel could qualify the plant as self-sufficient, except that the local bank wouldn’t loan the construction monies without a connection to the IOU grid. This form of “energy independence” in many ways replicates the old water/steam mills and competes directly with IOU-priced power.

4) Respect for small-is-sustainable “Distributed generation” has become the term to capture the latest, hottest trend in the electric utility industry — small, decentralized generating stations that can be customer-owned, or developed and operated by third-party “independent power producers” (IPP) or some combination of IOU/IPP partnership using a variety of fossil fuels, renewables (wind, hydro, photovoltaics, wood) or exotics (landfill gas, fuel cells, wind-diesel hybrids).

Even the IOU corporatists are realizing that bigger (large power plants; pumping electrons over hundreds of miles of transmission lines) is not better. The industry has come up with an acronym, NTA, or non-transmission alternatives — that captures the emerging synthesis of conservation, efficiency, and distributed generation.

In fact Vermont’s public power producers fit the “small is better” ideal and have more in common with small local businesses than their IOU Big Brothers. Most people would agree it has been the thousands of for-profit, ethically run small businesses – be they retail stores, farms, service providers, manufacturers, or idea producers — that have benefited our communities by fueling new jobs, economic opportunity, and innovation. Capitalism with a respectful small “c.”

For example, a self-selected group, Brattleboro District Energy, has targeted their town for an expanded version of that kind of co-generation approach known internationally as a “district heating system” — a combination of a 5-30 MW electric generator running of any of a number of fuels (oil, natural gas, coal, biomass) and an insulated underground distribution system of pipes carrying hot and chilled water (think municipal water and sewer and add space heating and cooling to the mix). BDE would like to introduce the first new, biomass-fueled project to the United States. We have enough waste wood in Windham County to make the fuel supply for a 20-30 MW plant sustainable. Although the initial investment carries a hefty price tag ($30 million - $200 million, based on the size and number of generating plants and distribution networks), BDE realizes that Brattleboro exports $30 million annually just to stay warm and do business. And according to engineering firms that do this type of project, the numbers look good.
5) Dream Big  Vermont’s most logical option would be to add to the number of truly “public power” producers, the 22 small municipal utilities and cooperatives, some of which run small hydro and wood-burning plants. These co-ops and “munis,” currently service one in seven Vermonters. Public Power customers frequently pay less for electricity than the IOUs’ consumers. How come? Because compared to IOUs, the Public Power folks tend to be:

• leaner (less management overhead);
• more flexible (re-investing “profits” in their systems and in energy conservation);
• and more responsive to consumer/members, who have a direct voice and vote on policies and decisions.

The shortest route to adding to our state’s Public Power portfolio is pretty obvious, if we can shed the IOU/regulator propaganda. Here are five scenarios:

1) Name it the Connecticut River Authority (CRA) and they will come. Purchase the dams one-by-one to build a regionally controlled, locally owned CRA. Local Vermont-New Hampshire consortiums would purchase their individual dams and plug them into CRA system, using the current level of eminent domain and the increasing appetite of financial institutions for investments in sustainable projects.

2) Build municipal wind farms. Find a developer that specializes in building “turn-key operations” – which finance and build projects and then turn them over to a local entity (municipal utility, cooperative, or even a fire district). Such projects would neutralize complaints about the “industrialization of our ridgelines” and encourage NIMBYs to compromise, since they will have more control over the project and ultimately, ownership.

3) Invest in district heating. Copy those wingnuts down in Brattleboro, you say? Thirty years ago, no such district heating systems existed in Sweden. Currently, more than 50 percent of all residential and commercial spaces are heated by these local systems, and the Swedes are aiming for 75 percent coverage in the next decade. Crazy stuff? Most Swedes living in town turn up the thermostat like you and I turn on the faucet.

4) Plug-in transportation True plug-in hybrids are just around the corner, not just retrofits of Toyota Priuses or Honda Civics. Designed from the ground up to travel 50-100 miles on battery power alone (before the gas engine kicks in), “plug-in hybrid” vehicles like the much-hyped, coming-soon-to-your-dealer Chevy Volt will revolutionize our gas-guzzling fleet. The key concept is that when you plug in your car at night to charge the batteries, you’ll be paying pennies for the power – 2 cents to 3 cents per kWh, at off-peak rates. Those electrons will give you huge savings over $2-$3-per-gallon gasoline. Hence the auto industry is touting “100-mpg equivalency” for the plug-in revolution.

In short, Vermonters’ investments in indigenous or homegrown electricity (PV/battery storage, wind, biomass, “cow power,” landfill, hydro) will pay off handsomely. And we’ll export fewer petrodollars and circulate more of our local dollars, while getting closer to the equivalent to 100 mpg. Here’s the win-win: think of the dams and our “native” distributed generation as our own refineries and service stations.

5) Tap two deep pockets: Wall Street-types and your tax dollars To recover our Commonents by investing in these sustainable projects, we can use the same formulas as the Texas wind farm developers who now boast about their #1 ranking as the leading state in wind power production. Sure, the vast plains of that former Republic supply plenty of wind, but those sharp cowboys have accessed the exploding alphabet soup of funding incentives – RECs (renewable energy credits), RPSs (renewable portfolio standards), CGs (carbon credits), CREBs (clean renewable energy bonds), as well as a complicated mix of federal and state inducements. Believe it or not, there are deep pockets out there with such an appetite for tax breaks that they invest in Texas wind, take their write-offs over 10 years, and then sell off the money-makers because they can’t be bothered with the pedestrian task of supervising O&K (operation and management).

Perhaps Vermont will never afford to host an NFL franchise to compete with the Dallas Cowboys, but we can certainly lure financial markets to invest in our vision as the #1 sustainable, energy self-sufficient state.

The no-brainer is simply to allocate monies from the $2 billion State Employees Retirement Fund to invest in OurSelves. Not just the measly millions-over-the-years that is being proposed by the state treasurer, but chunks large enough to leverage or outright purchase the dams, invest in locally owned commercial-scale wind farms, district heating systems, and countless other worthy projects like helping Vermonters purchase the new plug-in hybrids.

What can we Vermont citizens do?

Certainly not leave it up to the current editions of the governor or the Legislature. The heroes will be well-informed, principled, and motivated citizens, taking responsibility individually and collectively. We will play champion to our all our Commons

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Livingston continued from page 1 was widely asserted in the New England press. As one editor put it: “whenever its provisions [the constitutional compact] are violated, or its original principles departed from by a majority of the states or of their people, it is no longer an effective instrument, but that any state is at liberty by the spirit of that contract to withdraw from the union.”

The first secession movement in America was over the question of size. The Louisiana Purchase territory more than doubled the size of the Union. New Englanders had little interest in a western wilderness that would drain their population and give power to the agricultural South whose economic interests were entirely different. Pickering hoped the British would capture New Orleans and control the mouth of the Mississippi. The western states would then join with Britain, as they had thought of joining Spain when she controlled the Mississippi. A widely publicized pamphlet urged the Hartford Convention to consider forming “a new confederation, grounded on experience…” The Western States beyond the mountains, are not taken into view in this connexion… Their outlet is through the Mississippi… If the Union of the States is preserved, the Western region will drain off the Atlantic population, consume the resources of the Union and reward us by removing the seat of Empire beyond the mountains. What then seems to be most obviously to the interest of all concerned? Let the Western States go off, and take care of themselves. Give them the public lands to pay their debts with, and thank them into the bargain… Then let us, who belong to the old family, try, by the agency of such men as are to meet at Hartford… to revise our family compact… that a lasting and beneficial Union might be formed.”

New Englanders opposed the war with Britain and the Embargo Acts of 1808 and 1813 that restricted their vital shipping trade. A Newburyport editor declared: “We have always been led to believe that a separation of the States would be a great evil… But rather than prosecute the present war, which will eventuate in the ruin of the Northern and Eastern States… we think it by far the least of the two evils.” Memorials from the towns poured in demanding state nullification and secession. From New Bedford, Massachusetts: “The time has arrived in which it is incumbent on the people of this state, to prepare themselves for the great duty, of protecting, by their own vigor, their inalienable rights.” Some thought the state should set up its own custom house and enforce free trade, and that the state fund a force of 30,000 to protect the state in its constitutional rights.

For many New Engelanders, a war with Britain meant indirect support of the tyrant Napoleon. A pamphleteer declared that the past two years had led to the belief “that if the General Government did not immediately make peace, that New England would secede from the Union and make a separate peace for themselves.” Gouverneur Morris, a signer of the Constitution, had long urged a federation of New England and New York. New England Federalists despised of peace and called for “as many of the States as dislike the War to form themselves into a new Government and make peace for themselves, leaving the way open for the other states to join them whenever they become tired of the contest.” Governor Strong of Massachusetts even sent an embassy to Canada to inquire about a New England armistice with Britain. The Town of Newburyport asked Massachusetts to “declare that our resources shall be appropriated to our defense, that the laws of the United States shall be temporally suspended in their operation in our territory, and that hostilities shall cease towards Great Britain on our part.”

As the meeting of the Hartford Convention approached, the exhilarating prospect of secession and a New England federation was in the air. One Federalist editor explained: “The plan as we understand it, is to make the convention of 1788 the basis of their proceedings and to frame a new government, to be submitted to the legislatures of the several states for their approbation and adoption. The new constitution to go into operation as in the former case, as soon as two, three, or more of the states named shall have adopted it… Instantly after, the contest in many of the states will be whether to adhere to the old, or join the new government.”

Founding Father Gouverneur Morris fully expected the Hartford Convention to propose secession of New England, and he hoped New York would join: “The question of the boundary to be… the Delaware, the Susquehanna, or the Potomac, will be the 50th anniversary of the Constitution. John Quincy Adams – no friend of the Hartford Convention – nevertheless believed an American anti-slavery society passed the following resolution: “That the Abolitionists of this country should make it one of the primary objects of this agitation to dissolve the American Union.”

John Quincy Adams – no friend of the Hartford Convention – nevertheless believed an American state could secede. In 1839 he gave a speech celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Constitution. The Union, he said, is held together not by force but by consent and common interests. Should that ever break down, ‘Far better will it be for the people of the disunited states to part in friendship from each other, than to be held together by constraint. Then will be the time for reverting to the precedents which occurred at the formation and adoption of the Constitution, to form again a more perfect Union by dissolving that which could no longer bind, and to leave the separated parts to be reunited by the law of political gravitation to the center.”

Four years after this speech, Adams and other New England Abolitionists put forth the humane proposition that the best way to handle all the problems facing the Union in 1860 was simply to divide it. But another and darker view would eventually prevail.

No Union with Slaveholders’ The war ended as the Hartford commissioners reached Washington, and with it the main grievances that had fueled the state nullification and secession movement. But had the war continued, a New England federation might have come into being. A legacy of the Hartford Convention is that it gave national prominence to the Jeffersonian theory of the Constitution, with its corollaries of state interposition, nullification, and secession. South Carolina’s nullification of the tariff in 1828 and 1832 was the same act as that of New England nullifications. And when 11 states did secede in 1861, they appealed to the same Jeffersonian theory of the Constitution as the New Englanders.

So did the Abolitionists. The movement began in 1831 with the publication of William Lloyd Garrison’s The Liberator. Garrison and his movement argued that the best way to subvert slavery was to separate it. The movement decided not to propose secession but instead nullification. Some business leaders had pledged not to remit excise taxes.
A false nationalist history had to be made up and sold to the people: an American version of the Platonic noble lie. It was now said that the American people in the aggregate are sovereign, and not the peoples of the several states.

Douglass Monthly edited by Fredrick Douglass, and of abolitionist Horace Greeley of the New York Tribune who declared after the Confederacy was edited by Fredrick Douglass, and anxious to escape from the Union, and Southern people have become conclusively alienated from the Union, and anxious to escape from it, we will do our best to forward their views.”

New England Abolitionists put forth the humane proposition that the best way to handle it, we will do our best to forward their views.”

But another and darker view would eventually prevail. French Revolutionary nationalism was sweeping Europe and by the 1830s had come to America. Nationalism required a unitary state “one and indivisible.” Such a state, however, was nowhere to be found in the American tradition, which knew only of sovereign states seceding and forming federations which were plainly divisible since the current one was the result of dissolving the “perpetual union” of an earlier one. So a false nationalist history had to be made up and sold to the people: an American version of the Platonic noble lie. It was now said that the American people in the aggregate are sovereign and not the peoples of the several states. Lincoln would famously say in his first inaugural that the Union is older than the states and that it created them as states. Though a historical absurdity, he was able to use this theory to justify invading the Southern states.

Coerced unification

Once blood was drawn, a nationalist frenzy gripped many. Even abolitionists such as Garrison and Greeley abandoned the humane and thoroughly American policy of peaceful secession and supported the bloodbath. But not all New Englanders did. Sherman testified before Congress that two million troops were in the South fighting secession while a million were in the North suppressing resistance to the war. Former president Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire courageously criticized Lincoln’s unconstitutional actions and the war. New England abolitionists such as George W. Bassett continued to unite secession with abolitionism: “The same principle that has always made me an uncompromising abolitionist now makes me an uncompromising secessionist. It is the great natural and sacred right of self-government.”

The thoughtful Massachusetts abolitionist Lyndsay Spooner, who had long supported a slave insurrection, opposed the war and afterwards wrote a penetrating critique demonstrating that a racist North did not invade to free slaves. The war was, as Lincoln said, a struggle to establish a territorial monopoly on coercion on the continent, and so was a typical 19th century European war of “unification.” Lincoln was the Bismark of the United States. But at what a cost. If fought today, and adjusting for population, the war would have yielded more than 5 million battle deaths, not to mention wounded and civilian casualties.

Spooner wrote: “All these cries of having ‘abolished slavery,’ of having ‘saved the country,’ of having ‘preserved the union,’ of establishing ‘a government of consent,’ and of ‘maintaining the national honor,’ are all gross, shameless, transparent cheats — so transparent that they ought to deceive no one.”

Since the “Civil War,” our nationalist historians have worked to guarantee that the cheat will not be discovered. But European-style nationalism was not the founding American tradition, nor did it take root in America until the late 19th century. After World War II, nationalism began to lose its grip in Europe, and is now in evident decline. Post-Lincolnian America is the last of the old 19th century nationalisms.

The New England secessionist tradition out of which abolitionists such as Spooner spoke is part of the Jeffersonian tradition available to all Americans. If European-style nationalism is spiritually and morally bankrupt, Americans have ample intellectual and moral resources in their tradition from which to forge new decentralist policies, and none better than in New England.
No empire has ever stood the test of time. The U.S. – us – is no exception to the rule. The American Empire is going down. It faces three imminent, interconnected, indubitable, endgame defining threats – peak oil, global warming, and terrorism. Not only is our government clueless as to how to deal with these problems, in most cases its policies actually compound them.

The Bush-Cheney response to the cheap oil endgame is to demonize Islam, transform America into a technofascist state, and, through its foreign policy based on the concept of full-spectrum dominance, hegemonize the supply of oil in the Middle East so as to keep our economic engine running.

As for the threat of global warming, Team Bush’s response can best be summarized by one word: denial. Pretend the problem does not exist, and maybe it will go away.

The threat of Islamic terrorism worldwide is a problem of our government’s own making. It is grounded in American arrogance, ignorance, racism, imperialism, and unconditional support for the terrorist state of Israel. President Bush’s so-called war on terror is an insidious campaign to create fear and hatred among Americans and Europeans toward Muslims so as to rationalize a foreign policy aimed at doing whatever is necessary to control their oil in the Middle East.

According to James Howard Kunstler in his provocative book The Long Emergency, the only way to survive the cheap oil endgame will be by becoming “increasingly and intensely local and smaller in scale.” As the cost of petrochemical products soars, we will have no other choice than to “downscale and re-scale virtually everything we do and how we do it, from the kind of communities we physically inhabit to the way we grow our food to the way we work and trade the products of our work,” says Kunstler. By downscaling we will use less oil, create less carbon-dioxide, and reduce global warming.

If our government is serious about ending the threat of terrorism, it must do six things. First, declare an end to the war on terror. Second, shutter the money-guzzling Department of Homeland Security. Third, withdraw all American troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. Fourth, eliminate all economic and military aid to Israel. Fifth, discontinue its inflammatory, shoot-from-the-hip, “axis of evil” rhetoric. Sixth, close the Guantanamo Bay prison.

When the dust settles over the Middle East, history may show that it would have been virtually impossible to conceive of a set of policies more likely to provoke terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies than those chosen by the federal government. Arguably, the greatest threat to America is the United States itself.

If we truly wish to reduce the risk of attack from abroad, we should close most of our 725 military bases in 153 countries; withdraw all American troops from Europe, Japan, and South Korea; unilaterally destroy all of our nuclear weapons of mass destruction; dismantle our extraordinarily expensive, ill-conceived, untested missile defense system – Reagan’s folly; abolish the National Guard; and create a voluntary citizens’ brigade to reduce tension and restore order in the event of civil unrest or natural disaster. Only then will the threat of terrorism be abated.

Realistically, the prospects for solving these problems appear indeed to be bleak. As our mindless president and impotent Congress try to muddle through, the risk of economic and political chaos is staggering. In response to exponential increases in crude oil prices, the dollar could easily tank, precipitating an international economic crisis and World War III between the haves and the have-nots, between oil producers and oil consumers, and between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The endgame is not pretty. The only way to save the world may be the peaceful dissolution of the American Empire.
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One of the major obstacles to getting people to think about secession seriously is a deep-seated feeling, larded about with patriotism and jingoism and pride, that the United States is the best country in the world. Bar none. By any measure. So what’s the point in seceding from it?

Of course, if it was the best country there could still be plenty of reasons to want to secede from it. Like having an independent country that could make its own different policies and laws. Like having a nation that was small enough to provide a real representative democracy. Like having a government on a scale where things could actually run efficiently and problems could be solved. Like escaping a country that is too corrupt, too big, too beholden to corporate interests to do things like managing Iraq, running a war, rescuing and rebuilding New Orleans, cutting nuclear armaments, saving Social Security, securing borders and coping with illegal immigrants, fighting a war on drugs, fixing the health system and providing insurance, improving primary education, allotting stem-cell research money, fixing the trade balance, securing the dollar, and... need I go on?

But that is in fact begging the question, for it leads us to realize that this is not the best country in the world, by a great many measures, and that there are many other nations that do right things and do them well. Let’s look at a few measures.

“Land of the free.” Is this not the freest country in the world, as our teachers always told us? (Let’s say that freedom is good. Leave aside that some freedoms, like a rampant free market, are not all that wonderful.) Well, not for the 2.3 million people behind bars, not only a higher number but a higher percentage of people incarcerated (700 per 100,000 citizens) than any country in the world. Indeed, we have less than 5 percent of the world’s population, yet 25 percent of the world’s prisoners. And the majority of them are there because they were not free to use (and sell) their choice of drugs.

By the criteria set each year by Freedom House for political rights and civil liberties—another general measure of freedom—the U.S. ranks pretty well. But 25 other countries also rank at the top. And that ignores the fact that political freedom is severely curtailed by the amount of money necessary to run for office—which at the federal level, as we’ve been seeing, is now something like $150 million just to get in the primary, and close to $1 billion to get in the general election. Freedom for millionaires and those who can balk them.

Health might be another appropriate criterion. Measured by life expectancy, the U.S. ranks 42nd in the world—42nd!—and behind a host of much smaller nations like Andorra, Japan, Macau, San Marino, and Singapore, the top five. Andorrans live on average 10 years longer than Americans. Or take infant mortality rates. The U.S. ranks 183rd in the world, well behind the top five: Singapore, Sweden, Japan, Iceland, and Finland. And in terms of effectiveness of health care, the U.S. ranks 37th. Add to that the shameful fact that the United States is the only industrial state without a universal health system, and ranks dead last in the percentage of people covered by health insurance. Christopher Murray, who examines world health policies for the World Health Organization, says bluntly: “Basically, you die earlier and spend more time disabled if you’re an American rather than a member of most other advanced countries.”—Christopher Murray

by U.S. off-year elections, in which only about a quarter of the population votes, we come in next to last, only Mali, which has had only two elections ever, performing worse. This “democracy,” in other words, really isn’t; if fewer than half the citizens vote, and something over a quarter of those decide elections, we are talking about minority rule, not democracy.

That connects, of course, to scale. One reason Americans don’t vote is that they don’t connect to the institutions to which they elect candidates—those are remote and bloated, and they are totally unresponsive to the people who elect them, so why even bother? Who thinks that members of the House, who are in fact representing on average 650,000 people each, know or care anything much about their constituents, except the ones who contribute in a big way to their campaigns? As for the presidency, we have ample evidence that the occupant can manipulate the voters (and the machines) to win an election and thereafter pay no attention to what they may want. It is for such reasons that almost all of the nations in the top tier with high voter turnout are small, many of them very small (the only sizeable ones are Indonesia and Italy)—because not only the votes, but the voters count.

So there it is. Not the greatest country in the world. Has some good features, maybe—jazz, say, and Hollywood, and spectacular scenery, and an awful lot of wealth in the pockets of a few.

But as to places to live, a great many other countries are superior. No point in keeping it together just for that.