Embracing Peak Oil: Powering Vermont’s Future
Carl Etnier and Annie Dunn Watson

Oil. We’re using it up like there’s no tomorrow. But there is.

Why is it, then, that nobody wants to talk about peak oil? We’re willing to discuss climate change; even send a tri-partisan proposal to the governor in an attempt to move Vermont toward a less fossil fuel-driven energy portfolio. But the “P” word hardly ever gets any press. At what cost, this silence?

Peak oil, as many readers of Vermont Commons know, occurs when world oil production reaches its peak and starts declining. U.S. oil production peaked in 1971 and is now at about half of what it was then. The resulting gap between production and consumption has been filled by increasing imports from other countries; we now import about two thirds of the oil we use. The actual point at which the world’s oil production will decline is in contention; what we do know is that when world oil production begins declining there will be no other oil-rich planet nearby to begin importing from.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Government Accountability Office released a report that concluded, “[T]here is no coordinated federal strategy for continued on page 6

Reclaiming Vermont’s Commons
State Senate Could Create a Common Assets Trust
Peter Barnes and Gary Flomenhoft

Like all Americans, Vermonters are familiar with private wealth (even if they don’t have much). By private wealth, of course, we mean the stocks, bonds, and real estate people inherit or acquire individually, including fractional claims on corporations and mutual funds.

But there’s another trove of wealth Vermonters are less familiar with: our common wealth. All of us are joint recipients of a vast inheritance that includes air and water, habitats and ecosystems, language and culture, social and political systems, science and technology, and quite a bit more. This common wealth is worth more than all private wealth combined. Yet we pay little attention to it, and as a result, it is being steadily privatized and diminished.

Vermonters could, however, protect and reclaim much of that common wealth if a bill (S. 44) introduced by Senator Hinda Miller (Chittenden) goes forward. Miller’s bill would establish a Vermont Common Assets Trust that would, where appropriate, manage the state’s common wealth on behalf of future generations and all living citizens.

Springtime trickles into Vermont at the leisurely pace of sweet moisture dripping into a row of sap buckets. CREDIT: WILL LINDNER
Our little newspaper made its statewide debut last issue – with 15,000 copies of our winter 2008 “Reviving Town Meeting” issue circulating all over the once-and-future republic of Vermont in close to 200 locations (and 500 subscribers receiving the newspaper through the mail). As we approach our third anniversary in print, this seems an appropriate time to introduce our newspaper’s mission and vision to the citizens of Vermont, since we are still fairly new in the Green Mountain neighborhood. So here’s our publishing statement, the words and ideas that inform who we are.

Founded in spring 2005, Vermont Commons is a newspaper by and for the citizens of Vermont. We are solutions-oriented, nonpartisan, and interested in promoting ongoing and vigorous debate about a more sustainable future for the once and future republic of Vermont, and the world as a whole.

From 1777 to 1791, the citizens of Vermont governed themselves as an independent republic. As we enter the 21st century, Vermont Commons is a multimedia newspaper dedicated to the proposition that Vermonters should consider peaceably seceding from the United States Empire and governing themselves as a more sustainable independent republic once again.

Vermont Commons newspaper and web site publishes articles and opinion written by citizen journalists doing the good work required of us on a wide variety of fronts – energy agriculture, local currency, education, land use, localvores, media and more – by writers as diverse as Judy Witt, Hazel Henderson, Robin McDermott, Frank Bryan, Kirkpatrick Sale, Catherine Austin Fitts, Peter Forbes, George Schenck, and James Howard Kunstler. Some of our writers advocate nonviolent secession, while others are not yet convinced that this may be Vermont’s most viable way forward.

We believe that a sovereign state’s right to nonviolently secede, first championed in the United States by the citizens of 19th century New England, is a right that demands re-exploration in the 21st century.

All of our writers, though, are fierce champions of localism and decentralization. These visionary thinkers are helping us imagine a more sustainable Vermont future into which we can invest our time, energy, and financial and spiritual resources.

Our editorial approach is informed by three interconnected beliefs.

We at Vermont Commons believe that the United States is no longer a republic governed by its citizens, but an empire that is essentially ungovernable.

We believe that a sovereign state’s right to nonviolently secede, first championed in the United States by the citizens of 19th century New England, is a right that demands re-exploration in the 21st century.

We believe that a 21st century Vermont, working in concert with our neighbors and the rest of the world, may better be able to feed, power, educate, and care for its citizens as an independent 21st century republic than as one of 50 states within the U.S. Empire, given the new century’s emerging realities: climate change, global peak oil, and an “endless war on terror” for “full-spectrum dominance” being waged by the U.S. government for geo-strategic control of the world’s remaining fossil fuel energy resources.

And it is this publishing statement that graces the home page of our web site.

The 21st century is shaping up to be very different from the 20th.

We urge all Vermonters to take a good hard look at the future unfolding before us, and join this important conversation.

And to do so thoughtfully, and with an eye toward shaping a more sustainable future for ourselves and our children, at home, here in our once-and-future republic.

Long live the “United States.”

Free Vermont.

Rob Williams
Editor
Letters to the Editor

POST-‘BIG BOX’

Editor, Vermont Commons:

I happened upon a letter to the editor from a recent edition that suggested that the Vermont secession movement must strongly focus its efforts at those who work at multinational establishments such as Wal-Mart. I fully concur, and this must be a topic of immediate discussion within the pro-liberty movement in the Green Mountain country — how to guarantee Vermont will offer good jobs with dignity and utility to a wide variety of people.

What are some effective ways that the Wal-Mart effect can be challenged? Of course, a town can say “let’s ban Wal-Mart,” which in itself is a proper social action, but then do you provide a number of goods and services to the people of the republic? Is Vermont Commons and S.V.R. debating on the establishment of a viable economic infrastructure that can provide the people adequate goods and services? Will most items of necessity (i.e. furniture, clothing, bathroom items, modes of transportation) be produced at the local level, to facilitate economic opportunity for the people?

It is easy to discuss how sustainable agriculture/Slow Food will work in the Vermont Republic, but you have to ensure people like that low-wage earner at Wal-Mart that he, too, can thrive in a new system of government that rejects an amoral corporate wasteland. If you ban something, you have to replace it with something equally viable but more improved. People want real jobs, jobs with dignity and utility, and that is definitely not big-box multinationals or fast food chains.

You need to address how to properly replace Wal-Mart and other faceless chain stores while being able to meet the needs of the populace.

Godspeed.

Ben Holmes
Portland, Maine

RIGHT TO SECEDE

Editor, Vermont Commons:

I doubt I would agree too much with your organization politically speaking, but I certainly support your right to secede from this nation! Live and let live! Let’s break up this monstrosity and live the way the founders intended.

Good luck.

Christopher Jones
Gallatin, Tennessee

SECESSION EFFORT SHOULD GET GRASSROOTS

Editor, Vermont Commons:

I’ve never been to Vermont, but I am following your group’s work with great interest. I think you should start a political party, maybe the “Vermont Independence Party” (like Puerto Rico has the “Puerto Rican Independence Party,” Quebec has the “Bloc Quebecois,” and Scotland has the “Scottish Independence Party”). I don’t think it’s enough for you to just have a “movement” or “organization”; there ought to be a political party to contest elections. You should recruit candidates and run them in elections (for every office – city council, town boards, sheriffs, mayors, commissioners, etc., up to Congress). Otherwise, if you don’t field candidates and operate as a real political party, what are you? Just a theoretical group of academics?

I think yours is exactly the kind of movement that’s needed to shake up America’s so-called “democracy.” People all over the country are beginning to sense that our institutions are failing us. What we are observing isn’t something anecdotal; I believe it is systemic failure. Our government at all levels has been co-opted by entrenched corporate interests and lobbyists, and they have succeeded in steering the ship of state off course – away from the direction the people would have it go, and toward their own interests.

Unfortunately, whenever progressive groups in America have daring ideas they retreat to timidity and become debating societies, rather than constructing real change. You need to be building the independent Vermont of tomorrow from the bottom up, by putting together these institutions and creating the necessary building blocks of the new nation you wish to create.

The only way you can make your movement succeed is through a massive grassroots effort, and by fielding candidates to contest political races all across your state. You should also investigate the possibility of buying a radio station, a newspaper, and/or a TV station.

In short, you need to create “irreversible change” by putting together these institutions and creating “facts on the ground” which are popular with the Vermont people and cannot be easily undone.

There are many people out here in the USA who are looking at you and praying you’ll teach America a thing or two.

Joe Tangredi
Las Vegas, Nevada

DIVIDE, or DIE.
Who Owns Vermont’s Water?  
Exploring A Vital Part of Vermont’s “Commons”

Johanna Miller

Most Vermonters don’t think much about the water that flows from our taps – groundwater, primarily – until there’s a problem. Like contaminated water. Or no water at all.

The idea that the free flow of this seemingly inexhaustible resource might be an issue in Vermont – that Vermonters’ wells could run dry – has not crossed many people’s minds. Until recently, that is, when the Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC) identified and began to raise serious questions about a gap in the state’s water laws.

What we found was troubling. Vermont does fairly well in protecting water quality. But, in an increasingly thirsty world, the Green Mountain State does far too little to safeguard water quantity. It’s an understatement to say that what flows into our sinks, our bathtubs, our showers, is a precious resource. Indeed, it is a vital, life-sustaining resource. Vermont’s current legal framework, which places few limits on the amount of water one can pump out of the ground, threatens to undermine the long-term availability of fresh water for important public benefits like municipal drinking water and farming.

For several years VNRC has advocated for action that would allow diverse use of the resource but help protect against over-consumption and depletion. In recent years, Vermont has taken steps to begin to address this issue. In 2006, the Legislature passed an interim permitting law for large-scale withdrawals and created a task force to study the issue and make recommendations to address it. In 2007, the state dedicated the first infusion of funds to begin the essential first step toward a solution: Mapping the resource.

In January of this legislative session, Senate leaders, including Diane Snelling (R-Chittenden) and Ginny Lyons (D-Chittenden), introduced a bill that would create the comprehensive groundwater protection program. The bill, S.304, has three primary components. It would:

1. Require reporting on all withdrawals greater than 10,000 gallons per day.
2. Create a regulatory program that allows diverse use of the resource but helps safeguard against over-consumption and depletion.
3. Declare groundwater a “public trust” resource.

More than two-thirds of Vermonters rely on groundwater for drinking water. Farmers rely on groundwater for irrigation and for drinking water for farm animals. Businesses rely on groundwater for their operations. If enacted, legislation supporting a strong groundwater-management program would significantly bolster the state’s ability to safeguard supplies for important current and future uses.

In an increasingly water-scarce world, such measures are essential. They could help avoid scenarios like those that played out powerfully in the Southeast and Southwest recently, when there was too little water to go around.

Last summer, New Mexico’s governor called on Midwestern states to ship Great Lakes water to the arid Southeast. A historic drought in Georgia, meanwhile, rapidly shrank the state’s water supplies and triggered the governor to declare a state of emergency. For months, Georgia leaders squabbled with Florida officials over water supplies and millions of residents fretted about access to ample supplies of clean, fresh water before rains finally replenished their supply.

What’s the connection between water shortages in arid, southern states and the water-rich state of Vermont? As thirsty communities look beyond their borders to meet their water needs, that connection becomes clearer. Combine the interplay of thirsty and thirstier communities with the fact that demand has already outstripped supply in some Vermont communities, and the situation begins to look much worse.

The list of water problems has been growing in Vermont in recent years. In Williston, new housing developments drew so much water from an aquifer that wells went dry. In Randolph, a water bottling operation sucked so much water out of a nearby aquifer that neighbors’ wells dried up and a nearby trout stream was degraded. In the rural Northeast Kingdom town of Montgomery, a lack of rain triggered water shortages significant enough to place the community on a boil water order and force the town to truck in water for customers whose taps ran dry.

Recent new proposals to tap Vermont aquifers for water bottling operations in Claremont, N.H., and East Montpelier have triggered important community conversations about ownership of the resource.

The proposal to bottle and sell spring water from a source right outside the capital city has ignited a lively civic debate over ownership of water.

As East Montpelier and other Vermont communities wrestle with their individual situations, the state is working to help towns get in front of water problems by implementing stronger state-level protections for the resource. It’s promising that many legislators and stakeholders agree there is a problem, and that it needs resolution. How Vermont resolves the situation, however, is yet to be determined. It is also the most critical piece of the equation.

Ownership of a water “commons”  
VNRC strongly believes that declaring groundwater a public-trust resource provides a vital framework that could help answer one of the most important questions swirling around this issue: Who owns our water?

Unfortunately, the public trust issue, which would help assure that public interest in the resource comes before private interest, is the most controversial element of the bill.

The concept of the public trust is nothing new. The ancient legal doctrine holds that government, on behalf of the citizens, has an obligation to manage certain resources for the public good.

It has long been established that Vermont’s surface waters – its lakes, ponds and rivers – are a public trust resource. Essentially, the designation signifies that the waters of the state belong to all Vermonters, as a common resource. Despite the hydrological connection between groundwater and surface water and the importance of safeguarding our primary drinking water supply, however, the public trust doctrine does not apply to groundwater.

This disconnect in public policy is troubling, not only because it fails to equalize protections for an interconnected resource (illogical if nothing else). It’s troubling as well because water is an essential, life-sustaining resource that must be managed carefully to ensure its availability into the future. Declaring groundwater public is a good old Yankee common-sense strategy that would help accomplish this goal. Many other states, including neighboring New Hampshire, have already embraced public trust. New Hampshire’s ground-

Help Vermont Protect Groundwater!  
Learn more about the issue and how you can get involved by contacting the Vermont Natural Resources Council at www.vnrc.org or 802-223-2328, or jmiller@vnrc.org. Most important, contact your legislators and ask them to support S.304. Let them know a good groundwater law is essential because:

• Vermont lags behind other states in safeguarding groundwater, which accounts for two-thirds of our drinking water supplies;
• A comprehensive program that manages the state’s resource for current and future interests is vital;
• Public trust declaration is critical, as it places common interest in the resource over private interests.

Reach your legislators at http://www.leg.state.vt.us/legdir/legdir2.htm.

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A Health Care System for the New Vermont

Jane Dwinell, RN

When Vermont peaceably secedes from the U.S. Empire, we will have a great opportunity to re-imagine all aspects of our life here. We can re-make the government, the transportation system, the environmental regulations, the education system, the services for the people who need help, and the health care system. What a gift that will be! In the meantime, let’s share what we think might work.

Consider the nation’s health care system. Currently, we have a disease care system, one that favors people with few resources and over a certain age (Medicaid and Medicare) and those with fulltime employment with an employer who cares about providing benefits. The rest of us are left without – unless we can pay in cash (which includes my family, but that’s another story).

Doctors – and hospitals – are deeply embedded in this system of disease care. Minor symptoms brought to the general practitioner are soothed with prescription drugs and unnecessary tests. It’s a break-and-fix system that doesn’t respect the whole people that we are. Many minor illnesses (that may or may not become major) are often linked to stress and daily habits – headaches, stomachaches, and backaches to name the most popular. Where is there space in the system for talk about the stresses and strains of daily life, or the education to know the difference between a fleeting, minor problem and a major one?

Here’s how I think the health care system could be fixed to serve us better.

First, there would be universal health care (and illness care), period. Not by age, income, prior illnesses, employer, or life situation; the ability for everyone to go to a health care practitioner of their choice (physician, masseuse, nurse, acupuncturist, or herbalist, just to name a few) and to use the hospital if necessary should be for all. Not only would this cut costs and streamline care, but it’s simply just.

Second, the new health care system would encourage personal responsibility. Life brings with it aches and pains, and passing illnesses like colds and flu. It also brings accidents that may cause broken bones and other trauma. Many of our “bad” habits – smoking, excessive alcohol or illegal drug use, lack of exercise, too much junk food – have health consequences as well. At some point, many “minor” problems turn into major ones, such as heart and lung disease or cancer. There are lots of things we can do to prevent many of our bodily breakdowns, and just as many things we can do at home to care for ourselves when we, or our loved ones, don’t feel well.

But, not everyone understands and knows about these things. A true health care system (as opposed to disease care) will provide the citizens of Vermont with education and support to help care for minor illnesses and emotional upsets, to know when to call the doctor, and change bad habits to good. With all we have to do, it’s too easy to let that anger and stress settle into our bodies without addressing the root cause. It’s too easy to sit in front of the TV and have a beer or two than face our disintegrating marriage or annoying co-worker. In time, illness will result. The health care practitioner(s) we choose to go will help us face our problems (physical and emotional), and offer suggestions (besides drugs and surgery) to bring about balance and health.

What we have today is a break-and-fix system that doesn’t respect the whole people that we are.

Third, we should provide cradle-to-grave care, as much as possible at home. Hospitals should be used for critical care only, and the kind of lifesaving surgery and treatment that is, at times, necessary. Home health care services should be available to anyone at anytime – without a doctor’s order – for support around lifestyle issues and personal responsibility, care post-hospitalization, pregnancy and childbirth, home modifications for disabilities, and end-of-life care. We are generally more relaxed in our homes, and will heal better. Trained professionals may also notice environmental problems in your home that may contribute to illness, and can help you correct them.

Fourth, emergency rooms will be used for emergencies only. Because everyone will have access to the health care practitioner(s) of their choice, many minor ailments that are seen in ERs (stitches, earaches, sprains) can be seen in the office (or at home). Every community should have a health care practitioner available 24 hours a day to deal with these minor problems and refer people to the emergency room if appropriate. If our ERs are only caring for people with broken bones, heart attacks and strokes, traumatic accidents, and the like, long waits will be a thing of the past (as well as big bills). By divorcing true emergency care from minor problems that happen to come up off hours or to people without primary care physicians, it will keep people with contagious illnesses like the flu away from people with broken bones or in cardiac arrest.

Fifth, excess use of prescription drugs (and the attendant cost) will be a thing of the past. Depression, insomnia, erectile dysfunction, allergies, heartburn, and migraines will be dealt with in other ways. So many of our bodily aches and pains are not really “fixed” with a drug – they’re just masked. Sometimes talk therapy will help, sometimes energy work, sometimes meditation or prayer, sometimes a daily half-hour walk, sometimes a change in diet; the human body is, in many ways, a mystery. Different things heal different people – it’s not a one-size-fits-all system. As people take increased personal responsibility, they understand what makes them ill and what best works to bring them to health, prescription drugs will be needed in the rarest of cases.

Sixth, just to encourage personal responsibility even more, Vermonters who do not use the hospital over a year’s time should receive a significant financial rebate – $1,000 dollars or more per person. Nothing like money to make people sit up and take notice! It would be a simple, yet effective solution, encouraging good habits and self-care while saving us lots of money.

In the meantime, everyone should support H.304, The Hospital Security Plan, which would cover everyone in Vermont for hospitalizations. Check out www.takebackvermonthealthcare.org for more information on this bill, and then contact your legislators. This bill has bipartisan support, but your House member(s) needs to hear from you to help it get out of committee and onto the floor for a vote. •
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reducing uncertainty about the peak’s timing or its consequences.” Sadly, Vermont has no strategy, either, and we are even more vulnerable than the U.S. as a whole. Vermont imports 100 percent of its oil and is at the end of a long supply chain that begins as far away as Saudi Arabia or Nigeria.

Why should we care? The cheap, abundant energy that has fueled Vermont’s economy, heated our homes, and propelled us daily among home, work, and play is about to disappear – not the oil itself, but its affordability. As the era of cheap oil begins to wane, a memory of its days of yore is likely to be scaled back or cease. Whole sectors of the Vermont economy are likely to disappear. How many people will fly or drive here to leaf peep or ski, with gas at $5 or $10 a gallon and/or the world economy in a recession or depression?

Could natural gas, coal, nuclear power, and renewable energy plug the gap left by decreasing oil availability? Natural gas is also near peak; coal contributes more to climate change than oil per Btu of energy; nuclear power, likely to remain a long-term solution to storing high-level waste and no solutions to the risk of weapons proliferation and terrorism; and renewables cannot provide the sheer amount of power that has been exploited by burning half the world’s recoverable stocks of oil. (For example, hydrogen can be made by using electricity to separate water molecules into hydrogen and oxygen. Powering a single daily New York-to-London round-trip 747 flight with hydrogen generated by this method would require 400 wind turbines the size of those recently approved for Sheffield.)

What You Don’t Know Can Hurt You

Such profound and imminent changes cry out for energetic preparation. Unfortunately, most people don’t even know what peak oil is, and state leadership is not trying to educate them. We need to get the word out, to ride like Paul Revere to the corners of the state and shout “Peak oil Is Coming!” Except our task is much more difficult than Revere’s; the citizens on the roads to Lexington and Concord in 1775 already understood who the British were and what the consequences could be of Redcoats on the march.

Unlike Revere, we need to prepare people by explaining to individuals and local groups why peak oil is important. It’s especially important for us to talk to people who are willing to start writing letters to the editor, calling in to radio shows, and otherwise creating more awareness. Another way is to talk to leaders directly — both in government and in the private sector, including the press. This latter strategy – combined with the lack of response to peak oil at the state government level – has prompted the creation of the Vermont Peak Oil Report, being prepared by members of the Vermont Peak Oil Political Action Group with the intention of delivering it to the legislators in early this session. We are cautiously optimistic about the results of this endeavor.

Identifying Peak Oil Response Strategies

Once people are aware of the challenges associated with peak oil, possible responses vary. Some people simply despair. Among the constructive responses, most are aimed at finding more oil or oil substitutes, or learning to live with less.

At their extreme, supply-side policies are aimed at continuing the steady growth in dependence on oil or oil substitutes. For example, drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge or turn coal into liquid fuel. Taken alone, supply-side responses are short-sighted attempts to fill an expanding void. Figure 1 (below) shows the amount of new natural gas (expressed as barrels of oil equivalents) and oil production which must be brought on line by 2015 to compensate for declines in existing oil fields and meet business-as-usual growth. This is equivalent to 10 new Saudi Arabias, or 71 Arctic National Wildlife Refuges!

Demand-side responses acknowledge that we humans exercise a lot more control over our demand for oil than we do over the supply of oil or its substitutes. Demand-side responses include such things as investing transportation monies into public transit rather than building new highways, and promoting local agriculture, which cuts down on the diesel-powered miles food travels.

Given the scope of the challenge, we’re putting our money on the demand-side approach and in-state production of renewable energy. Since Vermont is 100-percent dependent on imports of fossil fuels, we also see a need for supply-side responses at the local or regional levels, not to continue growth in energy use but to provide us with an alternative to dependence on the global fossil fuel marketplace.

Responding to Peak Oil Through Relocalization

“Relocalization” is the frame that most members of the Vermont Peak Oil Network have adopted to describe their work. Relocalization emphasizes strengthening social and economic communities close to home. It keeps the means and benefits of production and decision-making in the community, creating jobs and reducing the need for transportation of goods and people. For example, buy your food from local farmers and bakers instead of national chains that source ingredients from China. Heat your home with wood grown nearby instead of oil from the Middle East, and superinsulate your home so there’s enough wood grown in Vermont to keep all of us warm. Instead of sending money out of state to fuel your car for a long commute, live close to your job and bicycle or walk there. Encourage the development of sustainable local enterprises within your community.

There are many sectors in which relocalization of goods and services makes sense and would reduce Vermont’s demand for oil: land use planning; conservation work; natural resources management/restoration; organic food production/distribution; place-based education; public transportation planning/enhancement (including rail); sustainable forestry and related products (management/manufacturing/distribution); green building and design; energy conservation and efficiency; local entertainment; non-toxic clothing and textiles manufacturing (employing growers, artisans, weavers, seamstresses, and entrepreneurs); conflict resolution and local health services; emergency preparedness; community-generated energy; citizen government; intergenerational care programs; citizen media; and locally owned businesses and services of every sort.

Relocalization strengthens people’s ties to one another and the land; it elicits collaboration rather than competitiveness. Relocalization outwits peak oil, and a good many other things as well.

Liberty and Interdependence are Vermont Traditions – and Make Us Happier, Too.

“Frames” are the mental structures through which people construct their vision of reality. They represent our values, goals, and moral inclinations, predisposing us to embrace or reject any “truths” that come our way. Anything said about peak oil, its consequences and responses, must speak to the values, concerns, and identities of listeners as well as promote the policies that can best smooth the coming bumps in our communities.

“Relocalization” is a frame that can appeal to Vermonters. Relocalization offers the opportunity to create economies and policies as if friendships and communities mattered, and gives individuals more control over the decisions that shape their lives. The following story of an iconic Vermont figure illustrates the benefits of relocalization:

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Each morning, Henry’s father drove his team of horses up the steep hill to deliver milk to his neighbors. In winter, he would make his way by peering through two holes he’d drilled in a piece of wood set up as a windshield. Everybody knew him. They knew where the milk came from. It was fresh and local, and buying from Henry’s father not only guaranteed good milk; it also granted him a lifestyle that had dignity and worth in his community.

The relocalization proponent can tie that story to economic policy:

How many of us can say the same about our jobs? Cheap energy has allowed us to seek jobs and interests apart from our communities, reducing our time for community life. No wonder Americans are among the loneliest of the world’s citizens. In Deep Economy (2007), Bill McKibben describes how self-reported happiness peaked in the U.S. in the 1950s and has declined ever since, despite a tripling of our national wealth. He blames much of the decline on the loss of contact with other people, which parallels the growth in automobile ownership and suburban sprawl. In Vermont, the additional pressure of local jobs disappearing creates its own special problems: dependence on distant jobs (and therefore cars) grew as job opportunities at home dwindled. New economic opportunities on a community scale are needed: good jobs, with dignity, right here at home.

Supporting relocalization can also help people accept, even embrace, one of the keys to a transition to a post–peak world: buying and using less stuff. “Put down your Playstations and get to know your neighbors” could be a rallying cry. Or, as the Center for the New American Dream puts it, make time for “More of What Matters.”

In Conclusion
There is no magic elixir, no silver-bullet approach to the successful mitigation of peak oil. One doomed attempt at a silver bullet is what Richard Heinberg calls the “Last One Standing” response, a military-industrial grab for control of remaining resources.

Relocalization offers the opportunity to create economies and policies as if friendships and communities mattered, and gives individuals more control over the decisions that shape their lives.

A better alternative is a combination of local responses, both individual and collective. Once people are aware of the peak oil challenge, there are many things they can do immediately, like start growing more of their own food, insulate their homes, reacquaint themselves with their neighbors, install wood heat, build up their bicycling muscles, etc. But individuals alone cannot meet the all the challenges; we need to respond collectively, through good policy, informed by and responsive to citizen input.

It’s time to start a conversation about how we as a state are going to respond to peak oil. In Brattleboro, the selectboard has authorized an 11-member Peak Oil Task Force to educate itself to the nature and consequences of peak oil, and to recommend mitigation strategies as appropriate. The Task Force is a logical and necessary extension on a continuum of community engagement that Post-Oil Solutions, the local peak oil and relocalization group, has been involved with for more than two years. Such efforts have worked in other places. The city council of Portland, Oregon, appointed a 12-person Peak Oil Task Force, which issued a report in March urging Portland to “Act big, act now.” Recommendations included reducing oil and natural gas consumption by 50 percent over the next 25 years, and they include strategies for doing that. This is the type of fundamental shift in thinking that creates effective responses to the peak oil challenge, and we hope that the Vermont Peak Oil Report will offer the same opportunity to Vermont.

We recommend that a Peak Oil Task Force be formed here in Vermont, to examine the consequences of peak oil for Vermonters and to recommend response strategies. It should, like the Governor’s Commission on Climate Change, be drawn from a cross section of Vermont interests. It should also include many people already involved in relocalization efforts, who know what they entail and how valuable they are. Let’s, as a state, recognize the scope of the peak oil challenge and coordinate our strategies to mitigate its consequences.

And, as individuals, let’s take up our civic responsibilities and create resilient communities right where we live. Peak oil is everybody’s challenge.

References
Association for the Study of Peak Oil & Gas (ASPO). A source of much technical information about the likely timing and severity of peak oil and gas. www.peakoil.net


The Relocalization Network supports activities of groups working to relocalize their communities. www.relocalize.net

The Vermont Peak Oil Network (VPON) contains and maintains many articles about peak oil in Vermont, as well as links to Vermont, national, and international resources. vtppeakoil.net

Just a day before this past Valentine’s Day, President Bush showed his love for the country by signing the 2008 Economic Stimulus Package. Sitting behind a small desk with a banner that shouted “Boosting Our Economy,” he inked the deal that will send tax rebate checks ranging from $300 and $1,200 to middle- and low-income taxpayers. Joining in on the photo-op were Nancy Pelosi and crew, all gleaming about this brilliant “booster shot” that, when injected into the national economy, is supposedly going to steer the country around a recession.

So, according to this brilliant plan, all we need to do, immediately upon receiving our check, is go out and buy a new computer, television, or car. It’s that easy, and everyone wins! We get some cool stuff, kickstart the U.S. economy, and we love our politicians more than ever.

And did I mention that, coincidently, it is in an election year? I think that the federal government’s “Economic Stimulus Plan” is an absurd band-aid solution to a deep, systemic problem and I don’t know a single person who doesn’t agree. In a recent “Localvore” blog post on Vermont Commons web site, I proposed an idea that would keep our federal tax rebates in the Green Mountain State:

…So, here is an idea I have for how we can all spend our checks that we will get in April. If we all do it, we will stimulate the Vermont economy – our little way of bucking the “system.” Imagine if all of us spend our checks on Vermont farmers. April is when most vegetable farms are starting to sell their CSA shares. Take part of your check and buy a CSA share for the summer. If you have something left over, hide it in your sock drawer and treat yourself to fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, eggs and cheeses at the farmer’s markets that will be coming back to life throughout the state in May.

…If we do with our check what “the man” wants us to do, we will go on-line and buy a new computer or TV from a big box store headquartered on the other side of the country. Whoosh...there goes the cash right out of the state.

On the other hand, if we give our windfall to our local farmers and they spend that money at a local store that in turn pays a local employee who spends some money on a nice dinner at a local restaurant whose chef pays a local farmer for the food served in the restaurant, we will truly stimulate the local Vermont economy.

The idea resonated with others and I began receiving e-mails from people who, like me, could smell a rat. I discovered a webpage on SimpleLiving.net urging us to “wake up and smell the rebate.” Vermont Commons editor Rob Williams and I kept bumping into each other at the NOFA (Northeast Organic Farming Association) conference last month, and each time we talked we became more convinced that we needed to act on this idea. By the end of the conference, not only did we have tips on how to grow better organic food (thanks, NOFA!), but we had a plan – www.KeepItInVermont.org.

The idea behind www.KeepItInVermont.org is to give Vermonters ideas on how they can put their tax rebate money to work to support neighbors, farmers, businesses, and not-for-profits right here at home. At the website, Vermont citizens can make a pledge indicating how they will spend their tax rebate money, and give each other ideas for boosting our own economy and enabling us to track how much rebate money Vermonters have kept in-state.

So, check out the website, make a pledge if you are so moved, and tell your friends and neighbors to:

Keep it in Vermont! •
Vermont’s Common Assets Trust would resemble the Alaska Permanent Fund, which for 25 years has used oil-lease revenue to pay equal dividends to all Alaskans.

When such assets are being excessively polluted or depleted, the Trust could establish clear limits on pollution and depletion, charge fees for private use, and distribute much of the revenue to all Vermonters equally. In this latter function it would resemble the Alaska Permanent Fund, which for 25 years has used oil-lease revenue to pay equal dividends to all Alaskans. (Last year’s dividend was $1,654.)

Such a trust, were the citizens of Vermont to create it, would represent a historic shift in America’s approach to managing nature’s invaluable gifts. Under our present laissez faire tradition, most natural assets can be used without cost or limit. For example, groundwater can be pumped and carbon dioxide spewed into the atmosphere without limit or monetary cost. There is a real cost, of course, but it is paid by future generations and other species, rather than by the corporations or consumers that immediately benefit from the natural asset. The Vermont Trust would make users pay something closer to the true cost of the natural assets they use. It would thereby discourage overuse and protect Vermont’s ecosystems for future generations.

The most obvious asset such a Trust could manage is Vermont’s air — in particular, the air’s capacity to store heat-trapping greenhouse gases. We are using that capacity beyond sustainable limits, as Vermont recognized when it joined the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) in 2003. The RGGI bill calls for the Vermont Public Service Board to appoint a board of trustees to manage funds from carbon permits sold to electric power producers. It calls for 100 percent of these funds to be used for the benefit of Vermont electricity consumers, through investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy. So the principles of a common asset trust fund are already established in the RGGI bill. But RGGI applies only to emissions from fossil-fuel burning power plants, which leaves 98 percent of Vermont’s emissions uncapped and unpriced.

That’s where the Trust could step in. It could set a gradually declining cap on all of Vermont’s carbon dioxide emissions, auction permits to emit, and use the revenue for clean energy, public transit, and equal dividends to all Vermonters. Prices for fossil fuel burning would rise, but everyone would get dividends to offset that rise. Individuals and institutions who burn lots of fossil fuel would pay more in higher prices than they’d get back; while individuals and institutions who conserve fossil fuel would get back more than they pay in. In other words, conservers would gain and glutons would lose, but all Vermonters would get something back.

Such a carbon cap-and-dividend system would also stimulate local economic development by boosting demand for energy conservation, wind and solar power, and bio-fuels. Germany became the world leader in photovoltaics and wind power by adopting a charge for fossil fuels and using some of the revenue to finance efficiency and renewable energy.

Water, a resource in common

Another urgent issue for the Common Assets Trust is Vermont’s underground water resources, which at present are subject to unlimited exploitation. Think of the Nestle Corporation’s extraction of Maine’s underground water at Poland Springs. Maine recently passed a bill establishing a freshwater resources board to evaluate, within the next 18 months, non-traditional uses such as bottling for resale. (LD 1743, text at: http://janus.state.me.us/legis/LawMakerWeb/externalstatetframe.asp?ID=288024655&KLD=1743&T ype=1&SessionID=7)

Maine citizens also are considering extending the “Public Trust Doctrine” which applies to surface waters in large ponds and tidal rivers, to other surface waters and to groundwater. And Maine is considering fees for bottlers.

Vermont currently has no Public Trust Doctrine for groundwater resources, although it has been applied to waterfront land such as the Burlington waterfront. Bottlers in Vermont such as Vermont Sweetwater and Vermont Pure Holdings are selling and exporting Vermont’s groundwater without paying for the use of this common asset. Other companies are eyeing large-scale bottling plants in Vermont, such as Montpelier Spring Water Company. S.44 could establish common property rights to water and charge fees to bottlers in the same way RGGI charges for the right to pollute the atmosphere with CO2.

Another natural asset that could be addressed by S.44 is mineral extraction. Vermont has commercial quantities of granite, marble (calcium carbonate), slate, talc, sand, and gravel, not to mention some copper, gold, and even uranium. Omya and other companies mine at least $73 million worth of minerals in Vermont. Did Omya put those minerals in the ground any more than Exxon put the oil in the ground in Alaska? The state constitution in Alaska says that all sub-surface minerals belong to the state. Why not in Vermont? It’s not as valuable as oil, but so what? Where is our share of the cash Omya is pulling out of the ground in Vermont? If they paid us dividends, perhaps there would be fewer Act 250 complaints.

How will issues of “the commons” play out in Vermont? Currently groundwater and carbon dioxide, the two hottest issues, are being dealt with on a piecemeal basis. RGGI has already established the trust framework for CO2 emissions. When Europe initially gave away all the allowances to polluters without lowering the cap, power companies made windfall profits without reducing emissions, and rates went up for consumers. As a result, Europe decided to auction 100 percent of electricity sector permits starting in 2013. RGGI has learned something from Europe. All the permits will be auctioned. The next thing needed is to expand the program to include all carbon, not just the 2 percent from power plants in Vermont. In the case of groundwater, even mapping is being contested by some farmers. Public Trust Doctrine applied to groundwater is a contentious issue, but it is getting quite a bit of attention.

S.44 is not a Robin Hood redistribution system; it takes nothing from productively earned income. The Trust’s income would come from payments for use of common assets that no one produced.

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A ward-winning Vermont filmmaker Eugene Jarecki, who took top honors at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival for his must-see documentary “Why We Fight” (now out on DVD), has spent the past several years researching the nature of the United States and the motivations that lie behind its war-making capabilities. As the world marks the beginning of the fifth year of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, he reflects on the costs of war, the nature of the United States Empire, and the notion of non-violent secession — the peaceful dissolution of the United States. Eugene lives in the Mad River Valley. Vermont Commons editor Rob Williams conducted this interview.

This month marks the fifth anniversary of U.S. government’s invasion and occupation of Iraq. What’s on your mind? Eugene Jarecki: The costs. Human, political, economic, and spiritual. Beyond the trauma experienced overseas by the Iraq people and American and other soldiers, the Iraq War has become a case study in the ravages of war on all aspects of the U.S. republic’s domestic life, as well. America’s framers, however flawed, were very smart in designing the Constitution to put what they called a “check on the dog of war.” They recognized that the chaos and insecurity of wartime are conditions that particularly favor the executive branch. If a bomb fell at this moment, no matter how much you and I believe in democracy, some part of us would be willing to say, “there’s no time to deliberate, we need to do something.” And we see a single individual as more able to just move on his feet than a large group of parliamentarians discussing the matter. This is a natural human impulse in an emergency, but it fundamentally shifts power to the executive to “do something” rather than Congress to “deliberate.” But it also means that if an executive can simply keep a country on wartime pins and needles all the time (e.g. the Red Scare, the “War on Terror”), then he can keep the country in a condition favorable to executive power all the time. The enormous executive powers that have been concentrated by the Bush Administration are evidence of the extent to which wartime fosters conditions that promote executive power and thus disrupts the separation of powers, a feature that is fundamental to the functioning of the U.S. republic.

When you finished “Why We Fight” a few years ago, did you imagine the U.S. would still be occupying Iraq in 2008?

EJ: Yes. America was building some 14 permanent bases in Iraq at the time we made the film and plans were under way to construct the massive new U.S. embassy there, so I knew we would still be there. I also recognized that whereas Vietnam was a skirmish between superpowers in a location that was geo-strategically irrelevant, the Iraq War is, by contrast, located at the epicenter of world power. There is no way in a petroleum-based economy like ours for America to have wrought the kind of regional instability she has done with this conflict (and past conflicts for that matter) and then simply withdraw. Rather, I am simply saying that when millions of us expressed our concern about this deeply misbegotten campaign from the start, beyond the obvious human costs that lie ahead, it was also clear that it was a trick-strategy for inserting a permanent U.S. military presence in the region. Americans were wooed into thinking it would be a “cakewalk” as the administration portrayed it, only to discover that it might be a “long slog,” only later to discover that we could never actually leave. And in fact, it could be argued that since this unfolding of events was entirely predictable, those who undertook it anyhow fundamentally knew that it was a long-term occupation they were likely committing America to. But I think they accepted that reality as a price of being the world’s leading superpower and wanting to have a controlling hand in the world’s most oil-rich region.

Our “take” at Vermont Commons since the 2003 conflict began has been that the Bush Administration, far from being “bumbling” or “inept” (as it is often portrayed in U.S. media outlets willing to criticize the Iraq War) has acted with deliberate and willful planning to destabilize Iraq, and make piles of money bombing, re-building and privatizing the assets of the country, while setting up a permanent long-term presence there. This leads to a much more important question: Can a so-called republic like the United States engage in “preemptive war,” as in the case of Iraq, and still remain a functioning republic?

EJ: For the reasons I gave earlier, I think war per se is incompatible with the principles and functioning of a republic. “Preemptive war” is simply a more advanced form of anti-republican policy that accepts a permanent wartime footing. If anyone can be a possible enemy and we do not have to wait for an attack to determine this, then a condition of war — once again, the condition that favors the executive — is essentially available anytime the executive declares that we have an enemy who needs attacking. Suddenly, without previous criteria for war having been met, we are at war, and we are then told that there’s no time or space to question the executive at a time of war. But if we are always at war, then that means one can never question the Executive. And that sounds a lot more like dictatorship than republicanism or democracy to me.

Agreed. So in a nutshell, to ask the question your documentary asks in its title, “why DO we fight?”

EJ: We fight because human beings have in them a mix of altruistic and selfish impulses. And just as children sometimes get along and sometimes don’t, governments and nations do the same. This is the understandable and probably inevitable aspect of why war is part of the human experience.

On top of this, though, we discover that there are systems of governance the world over in which the more powerful exploit the less powerful, and war is a vital component of these systems. So the American people did not decide to go to war in Iraq. A small handful of political and corporate leaders did. And then the American people — who are busy, and overworked, and spectacularly disengaged from the actual workings of their government — were essentially herded by a combination of political rhetoric and mass-media manipulation into a wartime footing. They were worked into anti-Islamic frenzy by the portrayal of 9/11 not as essentially the work largely of Saudi young men but as a widely Islamic experience.

Continued on following page.
5th Anniversary of the U.S./Iraq War

continued from previous page

By blurring this, Americans' lack of knowledge of geography and foreign culture is exploited to make war against any Arab state qualify as a legitimate response to 9/11. It is only later that the American public learns that the country their children will die fighting in had no link to 9/11 and that it was actually just a pre-conceived agenda of certain members of the Bush Administration to take out Saddam and occupy Iraq per se. So the oil companies have profited immensely from the war, the administration has drawn enormous executive power, the defense and security industries have seen their profits multiply. And the American people are left scratching their heads wondering how this all happened.

You are currently working on a book about the nature of American war-making. What are you learning?

EJ: I am learning that the problems we are discussing here do not belong to one political party or another. War favors the executive whether he is a Democrat or a Republican. We have as many wars in this country run by Democrats as by Republicans, and the reason for this is that war represents a convergence of the interests of the political and economic leading classes in America. It isn't a conspiracy where people meet in dark alleys and hand over suitcases full of money and whisper to each other about where they should drop the bombs. They don't have to do any of that. The system does it all on its own. The system is fundamentally oriented toward war. This is the case for more reasons than I can explain in this short interview, but to give you one example:

What is a congressman's primary job? To bring jobs and money to their home district, right?

The jobs are for the people and the money is to put ads on TV, telling the people at election time who brought them their jobs. Well in order to get these jobs and money, Congresspeople need to keep their corporate benefactors happy. And to do this, they have to act as a pleader on behalf of the benefactor to whom? To the executive branch. Whether it is a pharmaceutical giant that wants some FDA favor, or an arms maker who wants to keep getting money from the DOD for their F-22 fighter, or a media company that wants to loosen ownership restrictions, it doesn't matter. Take the F-22 as another example. So the Congressman goes to the executive branch in the form of the Department of Defense and pleads for continued funding of the F-22. "Dear Secretary of Defense, I don't need to tell you how much the people of my district see the F-22 as a vital part of America's defense" and so forth. The secretary of defense says, "Thanks for your call, we'll take it on advisement as we review our defense budget." That's on a Monday. On Tuesday, when another member of the executive branch calls back our congressman, this time it's the president. And he says "Hey congressman, I think there might be WMDs over in Iraq and I'm hoping I can count on your support."

Well, is the congressman going to say "Wait a minute! Show me the evidence, Mr. President!" I mean, remember, just yesterday this guy was asking the executive branch for a lifeline in terms of continued support to his benefactor. Is he today going to exert much resistance? No. That doesn't mean he will necessarily be absurdly vocal for attacking Iraq. But it might just mean he falls eerily quiet. And isn't that what so many of our congressional leaders did? Fall quiet? So what this shows is that the position occupied by the congressman is one in which they are actively subordinated to the will of the executive. They are stuck in the middle because money is so corrupting a force in the system. And it means that any corporate interest – whether drugs, guns, or butter – can make the Congress vulnerable to the executive's constant desire for war.

Only by taking the money out of politics can one stop this corrupt circuit from affecting both parties. Until then, it's a pretty airtight system.

We at Vermont Commons argue that the U.S. is now an "empire" rather than a "republic." What's your take here?

EJ: The word "empire" is, arguably, too small a word to describe the kind of unprecedented global power that the United States wields. I would argue she is somewhere on her way from a republic to something far more expansive than an empire, but at this pace and with this lack of foresight, she will nonetheless likely face the fate of an empire. And I don't think she or her people are prepared for that. And that is worrisome.

Those of us in the Vermont independence camp argue that the U.S. is an Empire that is ultimately unsustainable and that non-violent secession must be explored as it was in 19th century New England during the early years of the U.S. Republic. What's your take?

EJ: It's funny that Texas and Vermont are the two states that have most seriously considered secession in recent years and that they are both border states. I think that border identity makes one feel a bit more free to self-define, than when one is more landlocked within the country.

Having said that, I think the primary benefit of the secession debate is twofold. On the one hand, it is very healthy from a states-rights and individual-rights perspective for all Americans to remember that the United States is, was, and always has been a work in progress and that she is healthiest when her form of government is not assumed to be etched in stone but rather is a living, breathing thing that is responding to the discoveries made by her people about the challenges of self-governance. So, I think in that sense, secession is an extreme position that helps liberate us from a latent level of nationalism that can creep into our thinking and make us forget that this country is just one effort at democracy in a long global struggle for systems that safeguard human dignity.

In that sense, secession is an extreme position that helps liberate us from a latent level of nationalism that can make us forget that this country is just one effort at democracy in a long global struggle for systems that safeguard human dignity.

Thanks for talking with us, Eugene, and the best of luck with your book project.

Contribute to Vermont Commons

E-mail us your photographs, letters, and article ideas at editor@vtcommons.org
Secession and Sanity: An Interview with Kirkpatrick Sale, Director
(Originally in Z magazine, October 2006)

Bruce E. Levine

Bruce Levine: In today’s world, how realistic is the idea of secession?

Kirkpatrick Sale: Well, in today’s world, that’s what’s happening. The break-up of the Soviet Union, the break-up of Yugoslavia (continuing even now with Montenegro and Kosovo), devolution of powers in the United Kingdom, regional autonomy in Spain for the Basques and Catalans – all this points to the collapse of old-fashioned nationalism and the rise of regionalism. Just look at what’s happened in the last 60 years – the United Nations started with 51 nations in 1945, now has grown to 193 nations.

But if you mean how realistic is it in North America, that’s another issue. There are in fact a dozen nascent secessionist/separatist movements existing at present, from Hawaii and Alaska and Quebec to Vermont and Dixieland and Puerto Rico, and every day it’s more and more obvious that the United States is a deeply divided nation that simply doesn’t function well as a totality. And every day the Bush cronies’ bumbling and illegal antics in service to the empire make secession more attractive and the desire to leave this corrupt system stronger.

Is it even possible for the U.S., as a nation state of 300 million people, to have anything close to genuine democracy? Is this a more fundamental problem than George W. Bush, and is that why you are talking about secession?

KS: Nail on the head. At the conference in the fall of 2004 where we issued the Middlebury Declaration, calling for serious consideration of separatism and secession in this country, we went through a long process of looking at the alternatives for political action. We began by rejecting liberalism and reformism as being insignificant – any reforms by the Democrats would do nothing to substantially change the system or its course and are useless because if you got them they would be ignored or buried under by the powers-that-be. And, as you suggest, if one is interested in real democracy – participatory democracy, as we used to say – and true power at a local level, it is impossible to achieve that in a nation of 300 million people. Think of it: our system is so skewed that members of the House of Representatives are charged with representing the views of, on average, 643,000 people. You can’t reform that, you can only ditch it.

Then we went on to consider rebellion and revolution, which we rejected as being essentially impossible, faced with a government that is weak and foolish in many respects but has a lot of power in its police and military, and wouldn’t hesitate to use them viciously and recklessly.

So then, what alternatives are available if one wants to escape from a corrupt and evil empire – more corrupt and evil now perhaps than at some times past, but always so by its very nature, as are all empires – and feels called upon to try to change that empire? Emigration is possible, I guess, but it won’t do anything to change the monster. So that leaves secession. That is a way to establish an independent state no longer tied to the empire and its global reach, to create a moral distance from the perceived evil, to create some form of real democracy at a smaller scale, to be able to establish a whole new range and set of policies to make life better and more honorable. And in some way – more morally or philosophically than politically, perhaps – to weaken the empire, particularly in the eyes of the world.

There are a dozen nascent secessionist/separatist movements existing at present, as every day it’s more and more obvious that the United States is a deeply divided nation that doesn’t function well as a totality.

How can the U.S. governmental-corporate partnership not feel threatened by any kind of secession? And if threatened, won’t they become violent, both economically and militarily?

KS: That depends on a lot of things. First, of course, the timing and the mood of the nation when a secessionist state emerges. If it is prepared for with a careful campaign, telling the nation and the world why it is seceding, why it wants independence, then it might make it politically impossible for Washington to react with force. It would also depend on the perceived nature of the federal government at the time; if it is as corrupt, illegal, and inept as the present administration, it would not have much moral authority and would not likely be supported by national public opinion in mounting a violent attack. Also, if it is clear that secession represents the wishes of the great majority of citizens in that state it would be even more difficult to launch an attack, to get popular support for it in the rest of the nation.

And if it is also clear that the case can be made that secession is legal – the Constitution in fact says nothing about secession, you know, and as Confederate states were seceding in 1861 Congress considered an amendment forbidding it, which means that it wasn’t prohibited in the first place – then national and world opinion would likely be on the side of the secessionists. Of course that didn’t stop Lincoln, who showed that states will be punished if they try to secede, but it didn’t establish a legal case, and the legal, not to mention moral, argument for the right to secede remains strong.

It is not fantastic, then, to imagine that instead of a futile war, Washington would be willing to negotiate a settlement. At least some Vermonters think so. That way Washington might be able to establish diplomatic and trade ties that would allow it to still use some of the resources and talents of the new state, with the additional benefit of no longer having to maintain federal offices, regulators, highways, parks, dams, and such, and even presumably with a negotiated fee in compensation for these lost assets.

Another element in the mix would be an appeal by the seceding state to the rest of the world for support, with statements that these countries would not look kindly on a federal effort to crush the secession militarily. Particularly those nations that themselves have been created by secession – Norway, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and a number of others – would be asked to support the secession effort. And in the case of Vermont, where the secession movement has already made contact with other nations (and asked for membership in the international Unrepresented Peoples and Nations Organization), they would count on support from their Quebec neighbors and the separatists there.

All in all, I think you could reasonably plan on a peaceful secession, if you did the legal and diplomatic groundwork carefully enough. Though you still might want to keep your powder dry.

What about the argument that a large centralized power is necessary for defense and for a healthy economy?

Don’t you contend the opposite is true, that gigantic nation states invite catastrophic war and, ultimately, economic disaster?

KS: Well, yes, you’ve answered the question.

In the first place, there is no question about the fate of empires. They are inherently unstable because they must control both populations on the periphery and populations at home, and that leads to increasing repression, increasing discontent, and increasing fragility. Every empire in history has ended in multiple wars, mounting civil discontent, economic collapse, and environmental retribution – and the American empire will be no different.

Second, history also shows that big nations create big wars. That’s what Randolph Bourne meant...
by “war is the health of the state.” Small nations also sometimes create wars, but as Leopold Kohr shows in *The Breakdown of Nations* – and as I chart in *Human Scale* – they do so less often and the wars are also small. Besides – what “defense”? Who is the Pentagon defending us from, exactly? There are no nations that are going to attack us in the foreseeable future. After all, we have a military system larger than the rest of the world’s put together. The only attacks we’re likely to suffer are terrorist attacks, for which of course we are wide open, and the government shows no signs of being able to defend us from those. In fact, because we have created the biggest single bureaucracy in the world to try to defend us with “homeland security,” we’ve created a lumbering, inefficient, costly machine that can’t even keep bombs from landing at our ports or make our chemical plants safe from attack. Surely a small state would be able to be far more adept and efficient at protecting itself, as the example of Switzerland shows us tellingly.

War is the health of the state — and so is vast unequal wealth. In the face of that, doesn’t secession seem to make a lot of sense?

Are you comfortable with people labeling you as an anarchist or a libertarian socialist?

KS: I regard myself as an anarchocommunalist, which is too big a label for anyone actually to use – but it simply means I am an anarchist who wants to see society organized on a small, human scale, based on self-determining communities. That is the basic principle behind secession. Although nowadays, that more often focuses on states (Vermont, Alaska) or multi-state regions (Cascadia, Aztlan), it could apply as well to bioregions and communities.

As to “libertarian socialist,” I have no idea of what that means. “Libertarian” is a label hijacked by the decentralist Right, and “socialist” is a left-merger of the authoritarian Left. It’s not me.

Every empire in history has ended in multiple wars, mounting civil discontent, economic collapse, and environmental retribution, and the American empire will be no different.

In my day job as a clinical psychologist I see many people who have remained with uncaring, cruel, and dishonest spouses or employers – this resulting in a loss of self-respect that renders them too weak to extricate from these abusive relationships. Similarly, I’ve found that many people already know the truth that they are living in a dehumanizing society that cares nothing for autonomy, community, and meaningfulness, but that they are too weakened to take any kind of direct action. When a person is so beaten down, merely seeing the truth does not set them free, so I believe that a good therapist or activist must take that psychological reality into account and help create healthy energy. Have you found that simply having the balls to bring up the topic of secession creates such an energy? And where can people who are energized by talk of secession make contact with like-minded others and gain even more strength through mutual support and cooperative action?

KS: I certainly have found that the idea of secession resonates with quite a number of people – not all; some think it’s plain nutsy – because it’s something that actually seems doable to them. Once you reject acquiescence and reform and revolution as political responses to the empire, there’s not a lot left, and that’s why secession has the legs it has, why there are people in all parts of the country, the continent, talking about it. Why I’m having a convention this fall ([the First North American Secessionist Convention was in Burlington, Vermont, November 2006, the second in Chattanooga, Tennessee, October 2007]) to bring people together to examine it, perhaps to foster it.

As for getting connected and supported, there’s nothing but the old-fashioned way: put up a flag and see who salutes. A handful of people in Vermont began with a press release and a meeting, and now the Second Vermont Republic is a recognized force in the state, and there are marches, a newspaper, meetings in the state capital, and so on. Put the idea of secession out there – a letter, an e-mail, a press release, a pamphlet, a speech – and see who responds.

It certainly makes a lot more sense than trying to make change by voting or writing your senator or marching and demonstrating or sitting around pissing and moaning. It is logical, sensible, practical… and it just might work. •

**continued from previous page**

One man’s campaign against greenhouse gases? Or merely an opportunity to enjoy a beautiful Vermont snowstorm (while vehicular traffic snarls) on Burlington’s Main Street? Credit: Craig Pepin

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FREE VERMONT, FREE YOUR MIND

By Carolyn Baker

The Vermont Commons publishing team asked me to highlight recent books and documentaries regarding sustainability and earth transition that have been particularly important to me this past year. Here is a short list of my selections for your consideration in this time of upheaval, when it is more urgent than ever to stay informed.

BOOKS

Peak Everything, by Richard Heinberg who authored The Party’s Over, Power Down, and Oil Depletion Protocol. I actually read this book recently on the train enroute to Vermont. Heinberg lays out the facts impeccably but doesn’t engage in fear-mongering; however, his presentation of the research, along with possible options, paints anything but a rosy picture.

The Path Through Infinity’s Rainbow, by Michael P. Byron, a brand new book for which I had the privilege of writing a back cover endorsement. It is also published by my publisher, universer, Inc. The subtitle is “Your guide to personal survival and spiritual transformation in a world gone mad.” Byron is a political science and history professor and ran for U.S. Congress from California’s 49th District in 2004. I’ll be reviewing this book in the near future. But first, this is a short list of my selections for the past year. Here is a short list of my selections for your consideration in this time of upheaval, when it is more urgent than ever to stay informed.

The Final Empire: The Collapse of Civilization, The Seed of The Future, By William Kotke is nothing less than an encyclopedia of collapse and rebirth. I have just posted Part I of my review of this book and am currently working on Part II. One thing, among many, that makes this book so profound is that Kotke first wrote it in 1993. His revision and republication in 2007 offers a disturbing first part and an inspiring second part that validate his visionary assessment of planet earth’s dilemma 14 years ago. To this book I attribute, in part, a recent reawakening to the global economic, financial and political risks we face.

The Great Depression, 1929-1941, by Robert S. McElvaine. I reviewed this book on my site in 2007—a book that every American should read in the light of the current global financial meltdown. What is particularly heartwarming about this book are the anecdotes regarding cooperation and the manner in which families and communities joined to assist each other during this great economic catastrophe.

Financial Armageddon, by Michael Panzer, reviewed in 2007 on my website. In the review I said: “When all is said and done, Financial Armageddon offers some sound advice and strategies, which some readers may be aware of, for navigating the crumbling empire. The author insists that having access to information, especially alternative news, will be crucial. Not knowing or predicting how long the internet will exist or remain uncontrolled, Financial Armageddon author Michael Panzer strongly recommends that people familiarize themselves now with alternative news sites and continue to do so as long as they can.

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The shock doctrine, a book by Naomi Klein, is a must-read for understanding the use of terror by the U.S. internationally and domestically. Wolf’s End Of America is a must-read for anyone interested in the issues of power and politics.

The End of America: Letter Of Warning To A Young Patriot, by Naomi Wolf. I’m fond of using the expression “two Naomi’s, one voice” when I refer to the works of Naomi Klein and Naomi Wolf. The End of America was published by a Vermont publisher, Chelsea Green, and is not only a guidebook to how open societies become closed, but a detailed analysis of how the George W. Bush Administration is catalyzing the United States into full-blown fascism. My review of the book was posted on Vermont Commons in 2007. While Klein’s Shock Doctrine is a must-read for understanding the use of terror by the U.S. internationally and domestically, Wolf’s End Of America is a must-read for understanding the use of terror by the U.S. internationally and domestically. Wolf’s End Of America is a must-read for understanding the use of terror by the U.S. internationally and domestically. Wolf’s End Of America is a must-read for understanding the use of terror by the U.S. internationally and domestically. Wolf’s End Of America is a must-read for understanding the use of terror by the U.S. internationally and domestically. Wolf’s End Of America is a must-read for understanding the use of terror by the U.S. internationally and domestically. Wolf’s End Of America is a must-read for understanding the use of terror by the U.S. internationally and domestically.
and who has written profusely about his experience, most notably in Post-Soviet Lessons In A Post-American Century. I’ll be reviewing Orlov’s book within the next few weeks on my site. Meanwhile, readers may learn more about the book at the New Society Publisher’s website.

Nature And The Human Soul, by Bill Plotkin, is a book I currently cannot put down and will be reviewing soon on my site. It’s a developmental blueprint for how human beings can move from infancy through death as ecocentric, rather than egocentric individuals. I passionately recommend this book for all adults and for parents who long to raise children who are grounded in their own souls and in an intimate connection with the earth.

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DOCTEMANIES

What A Way To Go: Life At The End Of Empire, written by Tim Bennett and produced by Sally Erickson, is an absolute must-see which I have reviewed enthusiastically and promoted tirelessly at my site. During this past year I have come to know Tim and Sally well and hold them not only as esteemed colleagues but dear friends. I show the documentary to all of my history classes every semester. During the summer of 2007, Tim and Sally offered screenings in Vermont in Rutland, Montpelier, and Burlington. This documentary is both a memoir and a 123-minute catscan of the planet in this moment.

Money As Debt, written and produced by a Canadian, Paul Grignon, is a simple but not simplistic documentary explaining the history of money and fractional-reserve banking, current money-lending policies, and the printing of money out of thin air. It’s ideal for explaining finances to teenagers or children as well as adults and college students. I reviewed it on my site in 2007.

Maxed Out “Maxed Out” examines an industry that thrives on making people fail, then pursues them relentlessly to death’s door. The film fea-
Sometimes people seek out the Greenneck (god knows why) for his views on things green and rural and renewable and whatnot. This time, it was an overly polite young woman with a raspy cough, a college student working on a documentary film or video-embedded website or something like that. The Greenneck didn’t really understand.

She called him Mister and he corrected her and then they got down to brass tacks. He turned down his music, a compilation of classic Iron Maiden, and early Metallica. He rambled for a while, talking about his off-grid life and the contradictions that run through it and how it all came about. At the end of their 40-minute conversation, she asked him to summarize his feelings. And then, somewhat unexpectedly, it came out, a three-word call to action that the Greenneck does not follow as stridently as he could: “Stop buying crap.”

Can it be that simple? Maybe. Maybe. He remembers a few weeks back, visiting at his wife’s cousin’s home in rural Connecticut. A nice spread by anyone’s standards, 3,500-square feet of refurbished farmhouse, with an old barn and two acres of pond and trees and lawn. They asked him about solar panels. They asked him about wind power. They asked him about plug-in hybrid automobiles. They did not ask him if they should reconsider the 1,500-square foot addition they’re planning, or if perhaps they should try to drive less, or how to stem the flow of plastic toys and video games that already overrun the large room where their two boys spend many of their waking hours.

The Greenneck finds it vexing. The “green awakening” (a trite phrase, but it will do) that’s sweeping this country is, perhaps unsurprisingly, rooted in our collective faith in consumerism, in the barbiturate we call buying. We have reached a place whereby the only way to stimulate the economy is to send checks to the citizenry (and we daren’t exclude the poor, for they’ll be the first to bust down the doors of Wal-Mart with their “free” money in hand), where the only way to wash the blood off our hands is to buy it off. An array of solar panels – but better make it big, because we need to power the addition. A Prius – but let’s keep the Jeep for weekends. Clothes of organic cotton, and oh my, I must have that jacket, too.

We are fooling ourselves. We will not buy our way out of anything: Climate change, Iraq, the financial crisis, energy shortages. Each and every one of these issues has many roots, but perhaps only one taproot, a subterranean vine feeding on our insatiable urge to consume. Until we starve the taproot, the plant will flourish, and we’ll continue our long slide.

To change course now would be painful; to change course later, more so. And it’s not as if the Greenneck relishes asceticism. He likes his iPod, so long as no one sneaks any Jack Johnson onto it. He likes his five pair of skis, his trio of bicycles, his truck and tractor and chainsaw. But he sees the writing on the wall, and he’s slowing down. More often skiing the fields and forests around his home, rather than making the drive to the mountain.

He’d rather not think of it as his “green awakening.” He’d rather think of it as a deal struck with his future: Learning now how we’ll all live then. Maybe it’s a bad deal; maybe “then” will never come. But that seems like a bad bet, don’t you think? •
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Town Meeting Campaign

We, the undersigned citizens of the sovereign state of Vermont, call upon our state legislature to convene a special session to debate the following one sentence resolution:

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MUD SEASON 2008
Miller, continued from page 4

water has been afforded this safeguard since 1998. For many, the question is not whether lawmakers should declare groundwater to be a public trust resource but, rather, why they would not do so.

The Senate Natural Resources Committee has started deliberation on the comprehensive groundwater bill, and the controversial public trust component. A diverse array of concerned Vermonters have voiced their support for the declaration, among them the faith community. In 2006 the

“Water should be considered a part of the commons, accessible to all for the common good, rather than a product sold for profit.”

Diocese, Episcopal Church of Vermont

Diocesan Convention of the Episcopal Church in Vermont, at which 46 of 50 parishes were represented, passed a resolution that supports strong legislative action to safeguard groundwater and declare it a public trust resource. The Diocese’s explanation for this action is as follows:

“Groundwater is an aspect of God’s Creation under threats of contamination and depletion. Clean, healthy water is essential for human health and for ecological health as well. Water should be considered a part of the commons, accessible to all for the common good, rather than a product sold for profit.”

The spiritual and moral reasons of the Diocese and others complement the more practical reasons that move organizations like Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission to support strong action.

In a memo sent to the Senate Natural Resources Committee, Kevin Geiger, a senior planner at Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Planning Commission (TRORC), stated that his organization “strongly support(s) the concept put forward in S. 304 that groundwater is held in the public trust and is not a private commodity to be used at will to the detriment of others. Vermont is currently blessed with plentiful and clean groundwater, but this condition will continue is not necessarily certain. Many organizations have warned that access to clean water will be one of the challenges of this century. The climate is changing, and exactly how that will affect us is not known.”

As a planning entity, TRORC’s comments are not surprising. Suggestions that point Vermonters toward thinking about future needs and possible scenarios, offer important context to inform the debate taking place under the Golden Dome.

To guard against water shortages and competing interests in the resource, the state has a responsibility to consider future uses. S.304 currently includes a provision that prioritizes municipal water supplies and agriculture over water bottling operations. This could help avoid problems down the road, when debates over ownership of the water increase.

In East Montpelier, that debate has been intensifying, fueled by a proposal last year to tap a spring that at one time served as downtown Montpelier’s primary water supply. Thin details and deep concern about the proposal have triggered a strong grassroots reaction. Despite a petition with more than 60 signatures of residents requesting a public forum on the proposal, the East Montpelier Select-board declined to host a meeting. Concerned about the impacts a withdrawal of up to 300,000 gallons a day could have on area wells, natural resources, and the long-term availability of the resource, area residents organized a public meeting to learn more about the water bottling proposal.

‘Montpelier Springs’

For Carolyn Shapiro, one of the lead organizers, the growing trend toward privatization of public resources moved her to act.

“The issue of privatization first came to my attention when I learned of a multi-national corporation taking over ownership of Bolivia’s municipal water supplies and the dramatic price increases that ensued. Since then, we’ve seen increasing world and national problems around water. The drought in Georgia, for example. When a proposal to privatize, bottle, and sell water popped up next to me, I became quite concerned and wanted to explore it,” said Shapiro.

It was within this context that Shapiro set about helping to organize the January 17 public forum.

“Proponents are saying it’s good for the town; taxes and jobs. But it’s a broader issue for me. This issue brings out the notion of the public good,” she noted. “For me, it’s really about understanding what the common resources are and how that dovetails — or might not dovetail — with any kind of privatization.”

About 75 people packed the U-32 High School classroom, asking way more questions than there were answers. Most attendees raised serious concerns, but that feeling was not unanimous. Elliott Morse, a neighbor to the project, spoke in favor of the proposal at the forum saying, “They’re not stealing anybody’s water. That spring is as big as this whole room: eight feet deep. Water rushes out of that spring.”

The meeting clearly demonstrated that the public is cautious about the fate of an important community resource. Beyond questions relating to the day-to-day waste, energy, and natural-resource impacts that would come with the ‘Montpelier Springs’ water bottling operation, the question of who owns the resource topped the list of the community’s concerns.

Many residents walked away from the forum with important questions left unanswered. One result of the evening was the quick turn-around of a successful petition drive to place a temporary moratorium on large-scale water withdrawals in the community in front of voters on Town Meeting Day.

On March 4, with the ‘Montpelier Springs’ proposal in the background, East Montpelier residents will be asked vote on a temporary prohibition that would “allow the citizens of the Town adequate time to gather information regarding the impact of such withdrawals on the citizens and natural resources of the Town.” The moratorium was carefully crafted to ensure that existing water uses, like agriculture, are exempted from the temporary moratorium. The community considers the issue in greater measure.

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Like many complex community issues, there are no easy answers about how best to manage groundwater supplies. But the reasons for pushing for a thoughtful response are clear to communities that have faced problems in the past, and people who are considering the needs of the future.

Municipal drinking supplies. Agriculture. Industry. Long-term water security and availability. These purposes serve as powerful reminders of why Vermonters must act quickly to get in front of potential problems. Passing strong legislation that declares groundwater a public trust resource and sets up a system to manage it takes Vermont far down a path toward long-term protection.

Such action, however, is not enough. Commercialization, privatization, and trade agreements further complicate the situation. That’s why, when it comes to this essential, common resource, concerned citizens must remain actively engaged in ongoing community conversations about water. A sustainable and secure future demands it.
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I want to start out with a little game, called “How Do You Know When Your Empire Is Collapsing?” – invented in a little different form by a political scientist on Long Island. Let me give you a few examples of how it works.

Let’s say starters, you know your empire is collapsing when the empire that is your fiercest rival buys up a total of 26 percent of three of your major Wall Street firms for $9 billion, and declares that it has another $200 billion that it is looking to invest.

(Since we’re going to be doing some numbers here, I should pause to give a little reference for the concept “billion.” A billion seconds ago was . . . 1959, which means some of you here haven’t yet lived a billion seconds. A billion minutes ago Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee – more than 2 millennia ago. A billion hours ago, about 100,000 years before the present, the classic Neanderthal peoples were wandering Europe and the Middle East, and Homo sapiens started to move out of Africa. We throw the term around a lot, but a billion is a big, big number.)

Next, you might figure your empire is collapsing when its total debt obligations amount to $50.5 trillion. That is so big that it’s about the same as the total household income of everyone in the country, including the billionaires. In other words, we owe almost more than we make.

Or, take one more: You know your empire is collapsing when you start a war half the world away, on complete fabrications and in total ignorance, slog on for five years with no success (2007, you may have noticed, had more people in uniform killed than at any time since the war began) with an army half of which are lawless mercenaries and the rest are under-trained, ill-equipped, and unmotivated youth, and whose presence is not only making your homeland less secure but is damaging your reputation around the rest of the world.

Just like Nineveh, just like Tyre. In fact, it’s classic – just like all the empires that have preceded it, from Akkad to Hapsburg, from Babylonian to Dutch, from Persian to Ottoman, from Roman to Soviet, the American empire is collapsing, collapsing around us, and the consequences will not be pleasant.

You know your empire is collapsing when the UN, comparing a number of measures of child well-being in the industrial world, ranks you twentieth out of 21, behind Poland, Portugal, and Hungary, ahead only of Britain.

Or when the World Health Organization ranks your healthcare system overall as thirty-seventh in the world, below Cyprus, Columbia, Morocco, and Costa Rica, just above . . . Slovenia.

Or when scholars, measuring worldwide standards of living, including health, wealth, happiness, and stability, give Norway a rating of 37, the highest, followed by Iceland at 35, Sweden at 30, and the Netherlands at 27 – and give the U.S. 19. In other words, by this ranking the best country in the world is twice as good as America.

Empires usually make the same set of mistakes. The imperial structure fails because of its size, territorial reach, social stratification, domination of people and nature, and environmental ignorance.

In addition, imperial trade systems are so widespread that they are not well controlled, with many booms and busts, and it is the imperial elites who prosper at the expense of merchants and farmers. As Teotihuacán collapsed in the 7th century AD because it deforested its hills for building and agriculture, as the Byzantine empire failed when it used up resources and found its economy eroded by inflation and its unpaid armies in revolt, so the American empire has built a fragile imperial economy that is unsustainable and is already on the verge of crumbling, as the recent stock crashes attest.

Unsustainable? We have a trade deficit of $763 billion. And crumbling? The dollar has lost value everywhere – it is down by nearly 40 percent since 2000 – and the credit crisis is so vast that it is only by the most extraordinary financial contortions that anyone keeps any faith in the dollar at all. It will not take long before the oil states will no longer want to operate in that currency and the petro-euro will supplant the petro-dollar; and it won’t take long for China to dump its worthless dollars, as it is already starting to do, in the process of buying up our banks.

[You know your empire is collapsing when those who have lost faith in its currency bid the price of an ounce of gold to a record high in January of $901, and you have to dump gold from your reserves to get it down.]

Add peak oil. You know your empire is collapsing when it is willing to pay $100 a barrel for the oil it has unwisely built its whole economy on, can’t find a way to limit consumption (and slaps down those who try), and has about as much clue on how to develop an alternative as the Norse in Greenland did when they knew their herds were destroying the land but kept on using them until that society collapsed in the 13th century.

**Empires usually make the same set of mistakes. The imperial structure fails because of its size, territorial reach, social stratification, domination of people and nature, and environmental ignorance.**

The Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson said it more simply: our “ecological footprint is already too large for the planet to sustain, and is getting larger.”

That way to end of empire, for sure, maybe end of civilization.

Second, economic meltdown. Empires always depend on excessive resource exploitation, in their heartlands and then in colonies farther and farther away from the center, because their populations become large and their armies too extensive. And when the resources fail, the economy fails.

In addition, imperial trade systems are so widespread that they are not well controlled, with many booms and busts, and it is the imperial elites who prosper at the expense of merchants and farmers. As Teotihuacán collapsed in the 7th century AD because it deforested its hills for building and agriculture, as the Byzantine empire failed when it used up resources and found its economy eroded by inflation and its unpaid armies in revolt, so the American empire has built a fragile imperial economy that is unsustainable and is already on the verge of crumbling, as the recent stock crashes attest.

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Part 2 of this column will be published in the May 2008 issue.
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