Imagine that the whole world is abuzz with the story of our state’s unprecedented secession from the United States. We first hinted at “divorce” during our 2007 annual town meetings by voting in favor (208 of 216 towns) of a non-binding “Independence Resolution.” Then we got serious, lobbying for a statewide referendum option for binding resolutions. In January of 2008, we passed the “Secession Resolution” by an impressive majority. The legislature wrestled with the nuances of recognizing both the U.S. and Vermont Constitutions, but that summer the general assembly finally called for a state convention to decide the issue. After an intense four-month “conversation” that made the heated debate on union wars look like a WWF sweat fest, the 268 delegates, on January 15, 2008, delivered a two-thirds-plus majority decision to secede.

To make a long, improbable story short and sweet—the legal briefs alone would fill the entire fourth basement level of the U.S. Justice Department—the combination of spontaneous global outcry (“If the U.S. is so democratic, then why can’t a state democratically secede?”), formal international support for regional sovereignty (most notably the United Nations, Fourth World Congress, and the European Union), and the intense, bitter 2008 U.S. presidential contest (Condoleezza versus Hillary), completely compromised the U.S. government. The incensed speeches in Congress spurred CNN’s highest ratings since “Shock and Awe,” but neither the Republican nor Democratic parties wanted to officially play the “bad guy” role during an election year. The administration settled for Cheney’s “Good riddance, let ‘em go F*** themselves!” At this crucial juncture the Supreme Court stepped up to the plate despite the lack of prerequisite political guidance. It heard testimony well into 2009, when it rendered a murky 5-4 decision during an election year. The administration settled for the Vermont secession battle, but how this small, fledgling political entity would survive economically. For most Vermonters the big worry was where we would get our stuff—the endless list starting with food, gas, cars, heating oil, and toilet paper. And what about our jobs, especially those juicy federal postings? And Social Security and Medicare, the ultimate safety nets?

The “stuff” question evaporated on April 16, 2008, when the U.S. Border Patrol, stationed at hastily constructed border crossings on I-91, I-89, Route 7, and a smattering of secondary roads, simply waved through most traffic. Give multinational corporations credit. They called the shots in Washington. Business-as-usual trumped minor legal issues like national boundaries. From Civil War to civil U.S. Marshals in 150 short years. Go figure.

The federal jobs scare talk went the way of the fears around the civil-union issue. No one got screwed over, and in fact “Montpelier” (our name for the Second Vermont Republic government) has performed extremely well compared to Washington. U.S. federal jobs morphed into Vermont federal jobs. Vermont’s Postal Service delivered Social Security checks without skipping a beat. Dual U.S./VT citizens found that VT Universal Healthcare provided better service, less paperwork, and lower prescription costs than the U.S. semi-equivalents.

The serious stuff. The more predatory side of the global economy forced us Vermonters to work together to maintain and then strengthen our economy without floating debilitating international loans and pissing off multinational retailers. First, we removed ourselves from the NAFTA/CANADA style agreements and their international corporations’ rule-the-world arrogance. Then we took a history lesson to heart. The American Colonists rebelled against King George largely because His Highness Himself, His military, His Governors and His Parliament granted Royal corporations monopoly status and favored treatment, especially tax breaks. Colonial businesses couldn’t compete with the East India Company. That’s what “taxation without representation” was all about. We restored the Republic of Vermont’s Charters of Incorporation and the original intent: serve the public good (make money honestly) or take a hike (we revoke your charter). Goodbye U.S. model of corporate personhood privileges (Wal-Mart, Home Depot, Entergy, et al.) and welcome socially responsible business folks and financiers (local retail outlet, distributor, manufacturer) to a level playing field.

Our third trick dealt with money. At first we stuck with the Greenback to make the transition smooth for our consumers and international markets, but by 2010 we had launched 27 local currencies (with kooky names like Manchester Monies, Bennington Ethans, Burlington Bread, and Rutland Chips) to stimulate local economies. How local currencies work was a mystery to most folks back in 2005, but we quickly caught on to the benefits of basing our money on something more tangible than faith in the solvency of the U.S. Treasury. Our gold standard combined trees (the increasing value of our nation’s private and public continued on page 4

http://www.vtcommons.org
Looking Back, Looking Forward

Vermont Commons incorporated itself in December 2004. We figured out our publishing plan in February 2005 and assembled the team to make it possible that same month. In a breathtakingly short time we launched a website with an active (even hyperactive) blog and produced three monthly issues of our print journal, in which some of the nation’s best writers have made contributions. We did all this for less than $10,000, relying on the volunteer time of just about everyone listed on the masthead, as well as our contributing writers. As someone experienced in the difficulties and hazards of publishing, I find myself stunned into a kind of wonderment.

How did this happen, so much accomplished so soon, a birth of such swiftness that it must have been eased by the gods of the hills? Perhaps, because the time is right.

When my wife and I first moved to Vermont we settled for a year in Vershire. I remember one day walking by an old cottage on a climbing rutted class 4 road when the old lady of the house sprang out and accosted me with her collection of photographs of the area, taken more than 120 years earlier. I was stunned by what she showed me. All the land for miles and miles had been cleared, and grazing sheep had kept it that way. The landscape had been completely transformed—not once but twice.

I shall never forget the impassioned testimony of my deceased friend, Scott Hastings, a native Vermonter who more than any other person was responsible for the displays found today in Woodstock’s Billings Farm Museum. Scott exclaimed that the towering, epic work of those who cleared the land of stone and tree for the first farmsteads and made endless handmade walls snaking through the daunting hills and forests of the winter-fast frontier of Vermont accomplished the equivalent of what those pioneers’ ancestors had when they built Chartres, Rheims, Amiens, Salisbury, and the other great cathedrals of medieval Europe. Scott was a gentle man, but he spoke of this with passionate, utter conviction, as one who knew, as others did not.

Vermont went from subsistence farming to export of beef and grain, for decades to sheep and wool, and after the Civil War, to dairy, where we stayed for a century, so that even today Vermont and milk cows are locked together in the public imagination, imagery effectively exploited by Ben & Jerry’s and many others of lesser fame. In the mid-19th century sheep outnumbered humans six to one. Then they were gone. Later other Americans could be amused by the fact that cows outnumbered humans in Vermont. Vermonter made hay. The tourists poured in with their dollars.

While many homesteads pursued the tough livelihood of dairy farming, many other Vermonters spawned a roller-coaster ride of innovative farms (hemp was experimented with as a commercial crop from 1824–30), factories, quarries, lumber and mill towns, exemplified by gritty places like Rutland, Springfield, Barre, St. Johnsbury, and once upon a time, Burlington. It seems there have always been two groups of Vermonter, economically speaking.

One historian claims that in the early 19th century Vermont, “lacking an aristocracy of wealth,” was “the most democratic state in New England.” The Jeffersonian ethos held political sway in the state. To some extent it still does. Remember, much of Vermont wasn’t electrified until 1950. Agrarian values held firm. Despite the turmoil of the last quarter century or more, during which time even latecomers such as myself have witnessed the demise of the small dairy farm, Vermonter as a whole are still innovating, even as farmers. The land itself speaks to us; it is bountiful, but contrived toward the small-scale.

So what of the future? From where I stand—and I am a decentralist who has spent most of his adult life as witness to the profligate growth of humanity’s footprint on the back of a lonely but gorgeous biosphere—great changes are coming. Last month a Bush Administration insider, a powerful oil investment banker from Houston named Matthew Simmons, published a book called Twilight in the Desert: The Coming Saudi Oil Shock and the World Economy. This is no potboiler. Simmons was inside the room when Vice President Cheney convened the secret “energy task force” meetings of January 2000, whose proceedings are now sealed from public view forever.

In a word, Simmons says the twilight of the petroleum age is upon us. As one reviewer put it, with the eclipse of Saudi Arabia’s handful of big fields “the world will face an energy crisis of unprecedented scale.” Oil is not merely cheap (up to recently); it is ubiquitous. James Howard Kunstler has written about its meaning in these pages (May 2005). Wal-Mart and other “big box” shopping villages encased in four walls will perish. Quickly. Reflect on Bill McKibben’s remarks (April 2005) about what happens to towns when they invite such absentee-owner enterprises into their communities.

Now pause and consider reversing these trends that have so sapped us of our native spiritual vitality, our gumption. Food locally grown (eventually without chemicals) and locally consumed. Energy locally produced and consumed. Less car and truck traffic (but more foot traffic). Less non-biodegradable waste: less plastics, the wonder material of yore. More conviviality? More frugality? Who knows? It will be interesting for those of us willing to find it so.

The question each of us must ask her or himself is do we have it in us to respond? Wendell Berry has said in these pages (July 2005) “The great obstacle [to change] is simply this: the conviction that we cannot change because we are dependent on what is wrong. But that is the addict’s excuse, and we know that it will not do.”

Indeed it will not “do.” And we know it, or soon shall. We will have to do what we have always done: reinvent ourselves. In this issue contributing editor Rick Foley’s “Vermont 2020” reaches forward and imagines just how we might, in fact, reinvent ourselves as a people, as a community, now, right here in Vermont.

Imagine.

—IAN BALDWIN

Contributors

Ian Baldwin is the publisher of Vermont Commons and cofounder of Chelsea Green Publishing. He is a founding member of the E. F. Schumacher Society (USA), and a cofounder of the website Metahistory Quest.

Rick Foley, as a Professor in Technology Design and Safety at Keene State College and a longtime resident of Brattleboro, has been active in promoting Vermont’s energy independence.

Rowan Jacobsen is editor of Vermont Commons, managing editor of The Art of Eating, and ghost-writer of many books he’d rather not tell you about.

Donald W. Livingston is a professor of philosophy at Emory University, author of Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium, and president of the Abbeville Institute for the Study of Tradition.

Robert Riversong is a lifelong war resister, a 26-year tax resister, and a member of the Second Vermont Republic.


Rob Williams is a teacher, historian, writer, and musician. He is cofounder of the film production company memefILMS, board president of the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME), and associate publisher of Vermont Commons.
Don’t Embrace the Parti Québécois

I question Thomas Naylor and James Hogue’s assertion in the July issue of Vermont Commons that the Parti Québécois is “the primary political voice of the French separatist movement in Quebec.” Consider:

1. The Parti Québécois (PQ) betrayed the two greatest separatist premiers of Quebec: René Lévesque, who was the first premier of Quebec forming a government for the PQ; and Lucien Bouchard, who was the greatest statesman premier of Quebec for the PQ. Lévesque was shown to the door when he pleaded for moderation. Bouchard retired because he was sickened by the experience of being stabbed in the back. Recently Bernard Landry, former premier, then opposition leader for the PQ, resigned because he too was weary of infighting.

2. When Jean Chrétien, as prime minister of Canada for a judgment denying the right of Quebec to secede from Canada, was secured by judgment of the Supreme Court of Canada in 1998, antagonisms between Anglo-Canada and Quebec subsided, whereupon the PQ ceased to be the defender of French civilization as it had grown up in North America upon foundations laid by the Catholic Church and the British Crown. The PQ then developed an ideology based on the belief that the French Revolution must have been good because it was French. It is now a secular humanist, anti-Catholic party; and is thus far afield from what it originally was.

3. Without the Catholic Church and the British Crown, Quebec would not exist as a unique civilization and distinct society now federally united with Canada, but enjoying the right to secede and the option of independence should the need ever arise. So intense is PQ hostility to the authentic cultural foundations of Quebec that the last government sponsored by the PQ waived their objections to the Constitution Act of 1982, which had been imposed on them by Pierre Elliott Trudeau and was thus the primary basis of separatism in Quebec, and used the Act to injure the rights of parents to determine the moral and religious education of their own children—a right that has been championed by the Catholic Church, guaranteed by the Quebec Charter, and protected by the British Crown. The last government of the PQ actually attempted to impose a quasi-Freemasonic state religion for mandatory instruction in public schools even if the students and their parents objected. The rights of parents and children of Quebec have been defended against the assaults of the PQ by Marc Ouellet, cardinal archbishop of Quebec, a prince of the Catholic Church. The PQ has also proposed a plan to jettison principles of British parliamentary government which were taught to the people of Quebec after the Battle on the Plains of Abraham, and became for them the basis of civilized government at which they have excelled as a French-speaking polity. That plan will go nowhere, because the people of Quebec have too much sense.

It remains to be seen whether the PQ undergoes a meaningful revival and reform so it may once again be trusted to form another government. As things now stand, they are not fit for such responsibility.

John Remington Graham
St. Agapit, Quebec

Letters

The United States of Ourselves

Citizens of the United States love to complain about the government. Those of us who have discovered that our system is centered around personal opportunity and gain realize that despite the best interests of the people as a whole, the dollar rules the country. And many of us take to the streets in protest, chanting for an end to this war and for a new government. But we have to look at ourselves. For too long have I noticed that the problems of our empire, the negative effects it is having on our communities and communities around the world, is a direct result of our behavior.

Every American is guilty. We buy gas, shop at the malls, and indulge in the royalty our country gives us. At the same time many of us complain, pointing out all the inequalities and wrongdoings carried out by our government. But those wrongdoings are all carried out in our name. Sure, the war in Iraq serves the interest of Halliburton, Unocal, and so on, but in the end this is about our way of life. We are dependent on that oil because we Americans love to get in our cars and cruise around.

And it really is everything. The clothes we buy are made by children for pennies, the food we eat comes from streamlined, unsafe corporate farms, and the news we watch on TV serves the interests of its owners.

The collapse of the American empire may be well off in the future, or it may come sooner than we think, but right now there are things we can do to live our lives without supporting it. A lot of people (though not enough) have great ideas for controlling the corporate monster, but sometimes we forget that our purchases are what feed that monster, and they are almost always our choice. For example, do you really need new clothes? Billion of garments lie around in thrift stores, piling up with the rest of our waste. Reuse those clothes and you’ve avoided spending another 20 bucks at the Gap for something made for a dime.

Little things like this will not uproot all the problems of our nation, but at the very least we can all avoid taking part in our own decay and destruction. Thirsty? Why buy Coke when you can drink free water out of the drinking fountain? Need to visit the post office? Hop on a bike. Maybe an innocent Iraqi civilian will thank you.

Nathan Burgess
Champlain Valley Union High School

Letters continued on page 9
continued from page 1 sustainable harvests) and trust in the value of our neighbors’ contributions (products and services at a $15/hour rate). By 2012 these local currencies traded one-to-one with the new national medium of exchange, the Vermont Buck. The Buck is now recognized across the world—with the exception of China, the OPEC nations, and the U.S. Surprised?

So how are we doing? Turned out that both “original Vermonters” (residents of the former State—who’s there some irony here) and an influx of immigrants (predominantly disaffected U.S. citizens, as well as many “Brits,” some well-heeled Pakistanis and Indians, and three-quarters of the town of Killington) had access to significant monies, which they invested in renewable energy, organic farming, the forest-products industry, and innovative software and manufacturing startups. Like bees to honey. The hive is thriving, thank you.

By 2010 Vermont had established a strategy-planning process for a “sustainable economic future”—the number-one priority identified by the second national referendum in 2008. Montpelier itself bonded a wide range of major public-works projects: purchase of the nine hydroelectric dams on the Connecticut and Deerfield rivers, Vermont Universal Healthcare, penal reform (that’s a stunner of a story), a national high-speed planning process for a “sustainable economic future”—the number-one priority identified by the second national referendum in 2008. Montpelier itself bonded a wide range of major public-works projects: purchase of the nine hydroelectric dams on the Connecticut and Deerfield rivers, Vermont Universal Healthcare, penal reform (that’s a stunner of a story), a national high-speed technologies) concept started.

Sustainable Technologies) concept started.

by 2015, Montpelier reached some notable international and U.S. benchmarks: the Vermont Buck trades at 1 Euro even and $1.27 U.S., the 2014 Kyoto Protocol Award (carbon-neutral by 2018, based largely on hydroelectricity, wood pellet/waste cogeneration, biodiesel and cow-powered methane), highest number of LEED-certified building awards per building starts in North America, CAFE standard equivalent of 60 mpg (thanks largely to FisherCats), exports exceeding imports for the first time since 1847 (a little spin-off from the 2008 rejection of NAFTA and CAFTA), 85 percent energy independence, 98 percent GMO-free, Fifteenth annual International Indigenous Peoples Award. And we’re #3 in over-all standard-of-living, behind Switzerland and Monaco. Not too shabby.

Equally impressive are some odd ends and ends from our Montpelier bean-counters:

- 97 percent of Vermont’s spring and naturally impounded waters are safe to drink.
- 65 percent of all food consumed in Vermont carries an organic or free-trade label.
- 93 percent of Vermont’s hardwoods carry the “sustainable harvest” certification.
- 53 percent of imported construction lumber has been replaced by growing (yes, growing) source of graded, kiln-dried native hemlock and locust.
- 86 percent of all businesses hold the VESSA “Fancy” or “Grade A” stickers for livable wages, union representation, or employee ownership. (We’ll talk more about VESSA.)
- Vermont now ranks second only to Denmark in facilities’ energy efficiency, thanks to a gift from Uncle Sam. When Montpelier settled out of court for $500 million from the United States over the Clear Sky program’s exacerbation of the acid-rain problem, the OP leadership wisely pressured the legislature to invest the 2011 “windfall” in domestic manufacturing—windows, photovoltaic roofing, solar hot water, and electricity conversion facilities to convert the low value of excessive generation during spring runoff into hydrogen fuel. Remember the hype around the hydrogen economy? What a fizzle. Kind of like the Bush push to “nuke it up” just before Vermont pulled out. Well, the OPs have recycled the former Vermont Yankee nuclear plant site and they now dispense the H-pods that are rapidly replacing the old propane tanks. That’s 140 new jobs when you count the consulting engineers who are exporting the technologies.

Almost forget about Montpelier. Of course, most people on the planet know Montpelier as the “lab” (think tank, really) that bestows the VESSA label—Vermont Elders Sustainable Seal of Approval — on internationally traded products or services. Whether you want to launch a new item or take your 20th-century brand into the new millennium, you gotta get the VESSA “chop.” Remember when your toaster was UL approved? Remember when laptop meant IBM or Dell? Cell phones, Nokia or Motorola? Now it’s Macintosh’s AppleSeeds (VESSA).

Back to our Capital Crown Jewel. We all recognize the Capital’s golden dome nestled down in the valley. But have you seen for yourself the so-called “ambassador effect.” It’s like a magic wand from that reality TV show Queer Eye for the Ranch House swept through town. Forty-five countries now reside in spiffed-up Victorians or reincarnated factories. Dozens more have fancy offices. The hospitality industry has gone bonkers. Montpelier claims to have as many bed and breakfasts as Dublin, as many culinary choices as San Francisco.

Talk about happening. Can you believe that folks from Burlington, the Geneva of North America, travel down to Montpelier for a night out? And then there’s the global demand for Vermont cachet. Forget maple syrup. Now it’s our postage stamps, flags, Vermont Guard uniforms (very trendy in 24 unisex styles), and a long list of VAST Made-in-Vermont products. I won’t even mention the export sales of 1,500 FisherCats to Nepal next year. Or what the word is from certain members of the Russian embassy.

Most telling perhaps is that after years of being referred to, in a PC sort of way, as the Second Vermont Republic, SVR, “The Political Entity Formerly-Known-as-the-State-of-Vermont,” or more openly, “Cuba North” and “them-dumb-shits,” most folks, even on Fox News, simply refer to us as “Vermont.” And everyone knows that we’re a sovereign nation. It’s almost like we were never anything but Vermont—independent, democratic, tolerant, compassionate, always a little ahead of the curve. And a bit ornery.
Diseconomies of Scale: Dismembering Leviathan

By Donald W. Livingston

Free trade,” like “free love,” is a beguiling abstraction that hides more than it reveals. Absolute free trade would be an exchange of commodities between two people without the coercive intervention of a third party. But economic exchange is always embedded in a cultural landscape of noneconomic values, which impose restraints. Blue laws prevent trade on Sundays, medieval Christendom prohibited charging interest on money, and some think no decent society could legalize the sale of drugs or firearms. If someone disagrees with these restraints, it is because he rejects the moral ideals they express, not because he favors “free trade.” Within the restrictions imposed by usury laws, trade flourished in medieval Europe; indeed, it gave rise to the practices we call “capitalism” today. Those who value liberty may seek to minimize these constraints, but economic relations cannot exist outside of noneconomic restraints.

The failure to understand this leads to a number of modern superstitions. One is the illusion that there are economic experts in the way there are experts in medicine or chemistry. But economics is not a predictive science, because it does not have deterministic laws. We act on the basis of our knowledge, and no one can predict future knowledge (to do so would be already to possess it), much less predict how people would react to this knowledge. No one, for example, predicted the stagflation of the late 1970s. So-called economic laws hold only as long as the shared noneconomic restraints obtain. The “iron law” of economics—that there cannot be full employment and low inflation—does not hold if, like the Romans, you are willing to live by tribute.

Adam Smith correctly observed that it is from the self-interest of the butcher, baker, and brewer that we expect our dinner, not from their benevolence. Friedrich Hayek won a Nobel prize by refining Smith’s argument to demonstrate that the planned economies of socialist and communist countries were doomed to failure because no central agency could ever possess the knowledge needed to achieve what a market can accomplish without planning. This solid insight into a part of social experience would be transcended by some into a doctrine of the whole: the ideology of laissez-faire capitalism. As Michael Oakeshott observed, Hayek’s plan to prevent planning is perhaps better than socialism, but it is still a centralized plan that could and did collapse into another modern superstition.

To understand this, we should ask a question that Hayek failed to ask: How did communist and national-socialist regimes come to be? They emerged out of a Europe whose social order had been shattered by World War I, a war that was largely the work of liberal regimes. Milton Friedman and others have praised the period from the Congress of Vienna in 1814 to 1914 as the century of laissez faire and, consequently, as the century with less war than any other in modern European history. But it was also the century of wars of unification and centralization, in which smaller political societies of all kinds were crushed into vast states. This period was a century of relative peace only if the concept of war is limited to conflicts between large-scale nation-states. But if we consider the wars of unification in Germany, Italy, the Brazilian war to suppress the secession of Sao Paulo, the American war to suppress the secession of the Southern states (the bloodiest war since the Thirty Years’ War), and similar wars of unification elsewhere—not to mention global imperialism—we must conclude that it was one of the most violent centuries in European history.

The vast territorial states created by this runaway disposition to centralize justified themselves by claiming that they had cleared away petty, localist politics to make the world safe for cosmopolitan laissez faire. But any power strong enough to destroy the political independence of the German principalities or the Southern American states would not be content with merely playing the role of the “night-watchman state” of laissez-faire fantasy. Like everyone else, the night watchmen had ambitions, and with centralized power flooding in around them, they naturally graduated to estate management. When these oversized liberal leviathans collided in 1914, they left more corpses on the battlefield in four years than in the two preceding centuries of war in Europe. The old saw that liberal regimes are not disposed to war is true only if liberalism is viewed not as a concrete practice but as an abstract idea, since abstractions, of course, cannot do anything. It is no exaggeration to say that the 19th century was a Hundred Years’ War against smaller polities of all kinds in favor of unification, centralization, and consolidation; and the 20th century was an Eighty Years’ War between the gigantic leviathans created in the 19th century.

These disasters were the unintended long-term result of the disposition to centralize, first pursued with single-mindedness in the 19th century and justified in part by laissez faire. Centralization led to a spectacular increase in economic liberty for the centralizers, a massive loss of economic liberty for the smaller polities crushed into large-scale liberal states, and the elimination of most economic liberty in the new socialist and communist states that emerged in reaction to the spectacular mismanagement of power by liberal regimes. Lord Acton and John C. Calhoun warned their liberal contemporaries about the evils of ritualistic centralization, but no one listened. Their insights would later be given systematic shape in that school of economics known as “public choice theory,” which is associated with Nobel Laureate James Buchanan.

Whereas Hayek, following Adam Smith, had explored the “spontaneous order” generated unintentionally by individuals pursuing their self-interest, Buchanan discovered a principle of what could be called “spontaneous disorder,” generated unintentionally by the centralized governments required by vast-scale liberal states. Governments...
are disposed to grow at the expense of society by creating "public goods" that benefit their clientele. The only way to prevent this is by a constitutional system founded on the principle of a veto, including the ultimate veto: secession. (James Buchanan has urged that the European Union include in its treaties the right of a member state to secede.)

With this teaching, the 300-year adventure of Enlightenment liberalism comes full circle. Economic freedom may require not further unification but the division of liberal leviathans back into the smaller polities from which they violently emerged. Hayek, contemplating the clumsy leviathans of his time, observed that, in the future, liberty might best be preserved in small states. (Unfortunately, he never developed this insight.) This brings us to a question raised by Plato and Aristotle but largely ignored by modern political theorists: How large should a political order be?

Aristotle argued that everything in nature has a proper size, below which or beyond which it becomes dysfunctional. A cottage is not a small manor, and a mansion is not a large cottage. The charm and beauty of both is lost when the size is out of scale. What is the human scale of political order? From Plato, Aristotle, and St. Augustine down to the present, there has been remarkable agreement regarding the optimal size. A city-state of 50,000 to 200,000 is all that is necessary to produce a flourishing culture.

A city-state of 50,000 to 200,000 is all that is necessary to produce a flourishing culture. Some would push the limit to 500,000, but beyond that, nothing is gained. Experience confirms this. Athens (with 50,000) and Renaissance Florence (with 40,000) produced cultures that excelled in nearly every form of human endeavor and from which we still gain inspiration.

As the population of a city increases arithmetically, space increases geometrically. Problems of transportation, water, sanitation, crime, poverty, and corruption, which were easily handled on a human scale, increase geometrically as the population of a city moves into the millions. Vast bureaucracies are erected, often creating as many problems as they solve. Corruption and political alienation grow, and entire sections of the megalopolis (which can no longer be called a city in the traditional sense) are written off as blighted areas and resemble the results of carpet-bombing. A megalopolis in the millions, such as Sao Paulo (19 million) or New York (8 million), requires more resources per capita to maintain the monster than would be required for a city of human scale, leaving fewer resources for the cultural luxuries that are the reason for the polity in the first place.

Cities of this dysfunctional size appear only recently. The largest cities during the revolutionary period in America hovered at 30,000. New York did not gain 100,000 until 1820. The monster cities of the last 150 years are the creation of the centralized states in which they are embedded. Around 60 percent of Americans were on the farm in 1900; today, only around 2 percent remain. As the farmers disappeared, so did an entire order of villages and small towns. This shift did not occur merely because of “free choice” or “market forces” but because the rules were rigged to favor agribusiness and urbanization. The message from the Department of Agriculture in the 1950s was “Get big or get out.”

Since the history of such small cities as Athens and Florence prove that states of vast scale are not necessary for human flourishing, some other justification must be found for their size. For this purpose, another economic superstition has been useful, namely, that economic integration requires political integration. This argument was used to justify the big “unions” of the last two centuries: Great Britain, the nationalist union of France, the German federal union, the United States, the Soviet Union, and the European Union. But the scale of political integration has nothing to do with economic integration. Little Switzerland—one of the ten richest states in the world—is integrated into a global economy, but it is politically independent. It is not a member of the European Union or even of the United Nations. The city-state of Singapore is economically integrated with the world but has maintained political independence since seceding from the Malaysian federal union in 1965.

There is more economic freedom in small states because they must trade to survive and thus must allow fewer regulations on the economy. Large states contain a greater diversity of skills, labor, and resources that they can afford to impose onerous regulations that benefit special-interest groups at the expense of others. The tangle of regulations emerging from the European Union centralizes the economy, reduces economic freedom and consumer choice, and benefits large-scale corporations that engineer the spirit-numbing uniformity of an increasingly mass culture.

The pursuit of economic liberty (what Hobbes called “commodious living”) through political integration is a three-century-old story of modern politics. It is time that we rethink the entire project. The monster states created by modernity are not necessary for economic or political freedom or the flourishing of culture; taking their history as a whole, they are responsible for spectacular losses of both. Aristotle is right: The presumption must be on behalf of states of human scale. Extensive political integration is good only for domination and war. While it is true that size is sometimes needed for defense, federations of small Greek city-states defeated the monster empire of Persia, federations of mere tribes defeated the Soviets in Afghanistan, and Vietnam defeated the United States. No country since Napoleon has thought it prudent to invade Switzerland and face her well-trained citizen army. Does anyone think that the large states of France, Germany, the Soviet Union, Italy, Japan, and Britain were safe places to live in the last century? Is the United States a safe place to live today? With a military presence in every corner of the globe, the American regime is suffering the same fate as all empires whose reach has extended beyond what prudentance can peacefully hold.

We should pause to reflect on just how far the United States has moved beyond anything that could be called a human scale of political order. The Constitution was framed for three million people in 13 sovereign states. When the first Congress met in 1790, there was one representative for every 30,000. Since only property-holding white males could vote, that was close to Plato’s ideal figure of around 5,000 voting citizens per state. By 1910, the U.S. population was 90 million, and Congress capped representation in the House at 435, where it remains today. Now, however, there are 285 million Americans, yielding a ratio of one representative for every 655,000. If we apply this ratio to 1790, there would have been only five members in the House of Representatives. Or to put it another way, if the ratio of the Framers existed today, there would be around 9,000 members in the House. A deliberating body of that size would be out of scale. But does that mean that the ratio of the Framers is out of scale, or that the union has simply grown too large?

Congress and the president now spend over two trillion dollars per year, about two thirds of the gross national product of Germany. This vast amount runs through the hands of only 435 representatives, 100 senators, and one president. Never has so much financial power been controlled by so few. But it gets worse: Nine unelected Supreme Court justices make major social policy for 285 million, and the executive branch, through its creation of administrative law, has become a vast legislative body not answerable to the people in any meaningful sense.

Many during the founding generation wondered whether the Constitution they had formed could hold if the union grew too large. By 1860, it had swollen to some ten times its original size. It was probably too large by the 1830s; it was definitely too large by 1860; and it is certainly too large today. Lincoln made war on the seceding states on the grounds that they were not and never had been sovereign states. He said they should be thought of as counties in a unitary state. Although he was historically and legally wrong, that is how most people think of the states today. How large are these “counties”? If California were an independent country, its GNP would be the seventh largest in the world. Texas’s GNP would be larger than that of Brazil, and Florida’s larger than Australia’s or Argentina’s. Illinois and Ohio, taken together, would have a GNP larger than that of Canada. New York State would be the fifth-largest economy in Europe. These vast polities look like countries, not counties. Should they not be treated as such?

Florida, California, and Texas spend billions to cope with the effects of legal and illegal immigration, though they have no control over their own borders and virtually no control over immigration policy. Entire ways of life and traditions are melting away from forces over which the people of these states have no control. Vermont’s population is 600,000. Its debt for the $500 billion savings-and-loan bailout debacle of the 1980s was $1.1 billion, even though it had no failed savings-and-loan associations. What value is there in continuing to
prop up a union of this monstrous size? This does not necessarily mean that the union should be dissolved, for there are ample resources in the American federal tradition to justify states and local communities recalling, out of their own sovereignty, powers they have allowed the central government to usurp. But such recalling of jurisdiction requires a degree of civic virtue on the local and state level that no longer exists and can be restored only by seriously examining the value of the union itself.

Economists divide the union into five economic regions: the North, South, Midwest, West, and Pacific. If the states in these regions constituted independent unions, the smallest would have a GNP larger than France or Britain. The South, if Oklahoma is included, would have the second-largest GNP in the world, behind Japan. Each of these unions would be a significant player in the world. Even if they all had the same constitution, each would end up with a different interpretation of it. It is doubtful that these unions would have entered the European conflict that began in 1914, which would have reduced the scale of that horrible war. Without the prospect of American intervention, it was likely that the stalemate reached by 1915 would have led to a settlement. If so, there might have been no communism or Nazism, no World War II, and no Cold War. What happened did not have to happen. It is doubtful that these five unions would have concurred in the global gamemanship of the United States after World War II, even if they had united to fight the war. Each of these unions would be more inclined to mind its own business and heed the advice of George Washington against the pursuit of glory in global entanglements. They likely would not have reached consensus on the wars in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, or Syria. Troops from this hemisphere might not today be in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in an Islamic world that has long been allergic to a dominating Western presence. And if one or more of these unions had become aggressive and imposed its military around the world to protect the expansion of its commerce and culture, the terrorist blowback would have fallen on that union, not the others.

This is only a fantasy, not a suggestion for a political project; it may remind us, however, that there is a human scale to political order, that a great state is not necessarily a large one, and that a state can grow too large for its function. When that happens, it must be downsized toward a more human scale. Liberals are forever telling us that America is a country of change; they celebrate the rapid mobility of labor and capital and the massive influx of immigration, legal and illegal. We are told that we must get used to change and that the dissolution of traditional American society is the price we must pay for a freer and more universal society. We never notice that the change they celebrate is in the service of greater centralization on the part of the state and of corporations. Change always heads in the direction of gianism—of the Tower of Babel. Freedom and human flourishing might require not more unity and centralization but more division, separation, and diversification. The day may not be far off when the centralizers, having flourished for three centuries, will have to

**Tax Resistance: An American Tradition**

By Robert Riversong

Though I believe that political secession from the New American Empire is vital to the long-term sustainability of Vermont culture and is achievable in time, I would like to suggest a powerful interim strategy of individual economic secession. Tyranny cannot be sustained without the cooperation of its victims. The lifeblood of empire is money, and the most effective method of nonviolent non-cooperation is to withdraw from Caesar the means to fund his armies of oppression.

I suggest tax resistance as a method of severing our personal connection to the umbilical cord of power. Tax resistance, and war-tax resistance in particular, is as much an essential part of the history of American democracy as is pamphleteering and soapbox sloganeering.

Let me share a brief history of taxation and tax-resistance in the United States. From 1791 to 1802, our government relied on internal taxes on spirits, sugar, tobacco, and slaves in order to fund itself—similar to what, in New Hampshire, are known as “sin taxes.” In 1812, to help fund the war with Britain, the nation’s first sales tax was instituted on gold, silverware, jewelry, and watches—a luxury tax.

Then, in 1817, Congress eliminated all internal taxes and relied instead on tariffs on imported goods. It wasn’t until 1862, to fund another war, that Congress enacted the nation’s first income tax. Ten years later, the legislature eliminated the unpopular income tax and again taxed tobacco and spirits.

The income tax was revived in 1894, but declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1895 because it was not evenly apportioned among the states. In response, the 16th Amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1913 to make the income tax permanent. Until 1943, when the withholding tax on wages was introduced, only a very small percentage of the population was taxed. The withholding tax “democratized” the income tax and added 60 million people to the tax roles to pay for what was to be the beginning of the military-industrial complex and make all citizens slaves to government.

Tax resistance, however, began well before the birth of the nation. In 1637, the Algonquin Indians refused to pay the Dutch a tax for the renovation of a fort to house the very military which oppressed the native peoples. And the colonists learned a valuable lesson from this. “No taxation without representation” became a rallying cry as the colonists protested the 1765 Stamp Tax intended to pay for the quartering of British troops in the colonies. Thomas Jefferson declared that “The rights of conscience we could not submit [to the state]. We are answerable for them to our God.” The right of conscience was considered the most inalienable right of natural people.

In the early history of the American nation, however, it was primarily the Anabaptist churches, such as the Mennonites, the Brethren, and the Quakers, which openly refused monetary subservience to the state. Early Quakers refused to pay taxes for the American Revolution or to pay for the war debt, and they resisted complicity in the Mexican war because of its aggressive nature and the likely spread of slavery which would result.

And it was the Mexican war which inspired the father of American tax resistance, Henry David Thoreau, to intone, “If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would to pay

Earnest and Marion Bromley in front of their Cincinnati home.
them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood.” From the night he spent in jail, came Thoreau’s “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience,” a treatise which proved to have great impact on the following century as it informed the work of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

As it was World War II which created the opening for American economic and military hegemony, it was also that war which opened the door to the nation’s first secular tax-resistance movement. In 1941, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and the American Friends Service Committee protested the 10 percent Defense Tax surcharge on the income tax. And it was in 1942 that Earnest Bromley was jailed for 60 days for refusing to pay a $7.09 tax stamp for his car. Thirty-three years later, the home of Earnest and Marion Bromley was seized and auctioned by the IRS, inciting the first nationwide campaign around war-tax resistance. Eight months later, under constant pressure from people of conscience, the IRS finally relented and reversed the lien and sale. Contrary to popular myth, the IRS is not omnipotent.

In the meantime, Earnest Bromley, Rev. Maurice McCrackin, Wally Nelson, and others formed the Peacemakers in 1948, the nation’s first secular organization devoted to war-tax resistance as an avenue for “more disciplined and revolutionary pacifist activity.” The 40 who began the movement grew, by 1967, to 500 as the Vietnam War deepened. The powers and principalities began to fight back, albeit meekly. In 1959, Wally Nelson’s life-partner Juana became the first woman in modern times to be arrested for war-tax resistance, and in 1963 Rev. McCrackin was defrocked by the Presbyterian Church for his refusal to pay, saying, “To give financial support to war while at the same time preaching against it is, to me, no longer a tenable position.”

The counterculture was introduced to tax resistance in 1964, when Joan Baez refused to pay 60 percent of her income tax, the amount that went to fund the military. Though the tax-resistance movement was gaining momentum, between World War II and the Vietnam War only six people were imprisoned for war-tax resistance, and all for contempt of court.

In the 1960s A. J. Muste, another early Peacemaker, convinced 370 prominent Americans—including Lawrence Ferlinghetti, David Dellinger, Dorothy Day, Noam Chomsky, Albert Svent-Gyorgyi, and Staughton Lynd—to proclaim their intention to refuse to pay all or part of their 1965 income taxes. Karl Meyers, a Chicago activist, suggested refusing to pay the 10 percent phone tax, dedicated to funding the Indochina war, and the War Resisters League initiated the first national campaign of tax resistance.

As part of the 1967 Writers and Editors War Tax Protest, 528 wordsmiths stated their refusal to pay for war. From a seed of just a few hundred resisters in 1966, the conscientious tax resistance movement expanded to include 20,000 by the 1970s, and hundreds of thousands were refusing to pay their telephone tax. In 1969, the National War Tax Resistance was organized and by 1972 there were 192 local chapters throughout the country. By the 1970s, Peoples Life Funds—alternative funds in which to deposit withheld taxes—sprang up in a number of cities. Some are still alive today.

The first constructive response of government to this growing and unstoppable movement was the introduction, by Congressman Ron Dellums in 1967, of the World Peace Tax Fund Act which would allow a conscientious objection to war taxes and a diversion of the funds to peaceful purposes. This bill has been introduced in every Congressional session since then but has never been allowed to pass.

1978 saw a resurgence of the historic peace churches in their “New Call to Peacemaking,” and the election of Ronald Reagan led to a tripling of the number of tax resisters by 1981. It was also that year that Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle urged citizens to refuse to pay 50 percent of their income taxes to protest spending on nuclear weapons.

In 1982, a “National Action Conference” called by the War Resisters League and the Center for Law and Pacifism led to the formation of the National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee, which became the hub of the resistance movement. In response, the IRS began to issue $500 fines for the filing of “frivolous” tax returns, and in the next few years seized about a half dozen cars and homes from tax resisters.

In 1989, in an act of stupendous naiveté, the IRS seized and attempted to auction the Community Land Trust home of Randy Kehler and Betsy Corner. Randy was one of the few of draft age during the Vietnam War who took his draft refusal conviction to the Supreme Court. He ended up spending time in a federal penitentiary, but not before influencing Daniel Ellsberg to engage in a similar act of conscience and copy and release the Pentagon Papers.

Randy had also founded the influential Traprock Peace Center in Deerfield, Massachusetts, and initiated the nuclear freeze campaign. Though he was an easy target since he filed his 1040 each year and informed the IRS which peace groups were receiving his withheld tax money, Randy was well known and highly respected by many in the peace movement. The ill-considered IRS action—which brought them only $5,400—sparked the longest protest action in American history. For a year and a half, thousands from all over the world to rural Colrain, Massachusetts, to occupy his leasehold, and an excellent documentary film, An Act of Conscience, was made. The consequence was extensive free publicity for the always underfunded war-tax resistance movement, and a resurgence in interest and action. I helped organize and then led a “constructive program” which grew out of this protest: Building Our Swords Into Plowshares used 300 volunteers to design and build a super-insulated duplex, which was later turned over to Habitat for Humanity.

Operation Desert Storm, Bush Sr.’s 1991 invasion of Iraq, led to a flood of inquiries to tax-resistance groups by people saying they’d had enough. The IRS admits that 8,000 to 10,000 people today are conscientiously resisting all or part of their income taxes.

The scion of the Bush family dynasty (which made its money from supplying Hitler before and during WWII), George W. is now engaged in the most blatant and indefensible expansion of the American Empire into the Middle East and Central Asia where most of the world’s remaining fossil

continued on page 10
Letters, continued from page 3

Be Careful What You Ask For

Forgive me, but I happen to like “big business.” The large multinational corporations, with their production economies of scale, allow me to afford manufactured goods of good quality at reasonable prices. I can only guess what a washing machine, lawn mower, automobile, hot water heater, or computer would cost if manufactured by a mom-and-pop operation or even a small business.

And I like “big agriculture.” It brings fresh food from all over the world to my table all year long, at very reasonable prices. As a youngster, I lived on a subsistence farm, canning our summer produce, smoking our ham and bacon, and seeing nothing one could call fresh all winter long. Our life was devoted to feeding ourselves. There was seldom any time or cash to explore anything else.

And finally, I thank our “big government” for all it has provided that makes my life more safe and enjoyable. Before the interstate highway system, we traveled small roads at slow speeds in automobiles that were death traps at best, taking forever to get anywhere. Our large military has kept foreign troops off our soil since 1812, and the spinoff to get anywhere. Thousands more did not come from the resources of Switzerland or the Dominican Republic.

I’m wondering if anyone has considered the consequences that would follow should Vermont actually succeed in becoming a separate nation-state:

1. We would need our own armed forces for defense of our new nation. Even a minimal force utilizing modern technology would cost billions of dollars, assuming some other nations would be willing to sell us vehicles, weapons, satellites (and the rockets to launch them), and aircraft which we are not capable of producing ourselves.

2. The elderly would lose their social security benefits, including Medicare. Care of the elderly, including medical care, would be the responsibility of the new republic. Working Vermonters would lose their social security contributions made through the years.

3. All Vermonters would need an international driver’s license and a passport to enter the U.S.

4. Persons wishing to retire to Florida or other states would need to apply for U.S. citizenship or permanent residence status.

5. All insurance policies from companies chartered in other states would become null and void.

6. Many new bureaucracies would need to be created, including customs, postal service, homeland security, veteran’s affairs (for our newly created military), welfare, health care, endowments for the arts & humanities, and a host of others. We’ll need to print our own currency and stamps.

7. Letters from other states would require international postage, phone calls would be international calls, and our relatives in other states would find it much more expensive to keep in touch with us. They would need passports and proper visas to visit us during the holidays.

I could go on almost endlessly, but the bottom line is that this is a very tall order to fill for a small nation/state of only 619,107 citizens with a per-capita income of $20,625. Have you folks really thought this through?

Of course you won’t publish this, because to do so would not further your personal agenda—just as the systems you presently deride maintain control over the press and politics thereof to sustain their interests. Nothing really changes, even the ultimate outcome of revolutionary processes.

JAMES A. PEDEN
Shoreham, Vermont

Editor’s Response:

It’s good to get all these questions out in the open. Some need hard thinking to solve. Others are misconceptions that are probably common throughout the state, and therefore worth addressing so we can put them to rest. Let’s tackle some of those first:

Becoming an independent republic would not isolate us from others in the U.S. or other countries. Anyone who visits Canada discovers that it is virtually as easy as visiting New York. You don’t need an international driver’s license, a visa, or a passport. Calling or mailing Canada is as simple as doing the same in the U.S., and perfectly affordable. (And the next few years will probably bring affordable phone rates for worldwide calls.) And Canadians who wish to visit or retire in Florida find no impediments to doing so. All this would hold for a Republic of Vermont, too.

Currently U.S. retirees are free to retire in any country they choose and get their Social Security checks mailed to them. If Vermont became independent, everybody who has put money into the system would get every cent they were due, with no changes (unless, of course, the whole system goes bankrupt, as many fear). The change would be that Vermonters would no longer put new money into Social Security; we would need to design our own system as we saw fit—and it would be one far more likely to stay solvent, considering Vermont’s balanced budget versus the $43 trillion in U.S. debts and commitments. Yes, Vermont would need to replace certain Federal systems such as the Postal Service, Medicare, and customs, but the money is there to do so, in what we currently pay the Feds to do the same, and of course doing it locally would mean new jobs for Vermonters, instead of paying folks in D.C. to do it for us. Other countries smaller and poorer than Vermont have no problem maintaining national systems.

I’m skeptical of the notion that Vermont needs a military. Who’s attacking—Canada or the U.S.? The first never would, the second we’d be foolish to fight. Many nations such as Costa Rica maintain no military whatsoever. Other than the United States and a few banana republics, there seems to be little urge around the globe for empire-building. I’m even more skeptical that the greatest benefit of the military has been all the nifty plastics and radar that it has developed. Even if we assume that our lives have been improved in some ways by these products—a questionable assumption—that’s a hell of a price to pay, in lives and billions of dollars. I think I’d take my chances with no military, good friends, and a strong Vermont R&D Department.

But what about those Chilean grapes in winter? And that affordable lawn mower and automobile? The short answer is that a Second Vermont Republic does not preclude any of those things. People both for and against Vermont independence often make the mistake of conflating political independence with all sorts of agendas. But a Republic is not a dictatorship; it would have no power to tell people what they could buy, or grow, or what kinds of businesses could act within the state. The people of Vermont would make their own rules about how to govern life in their republic. All independence really means is that we would no longer be hampered by Washington in deciding such issues. And that’s no small point, as recent events have made clear. If you like the Supreme Court telling you that you can’t grow a marijuana plant in your back yard for your own use, or that you can lose your house if your city decides it wants that land for a shopping mall, then by all means stay in the Union. If you like Congress setting rules on how you should run your schools, if you think Vermonters should have no say in when to deploy our own Guardsmen, then the Union is working well for you.

In a sense I’ve dodged Mr. Peden’s question. He’s right that there has been a sentiment throughout Vermont Commons that we might be better off with smaller-scale government, communities, industry, and agriculture. And there’s certainly a hope that the people of Vermont, if allowed to steer their own course, would be able to come up with a model of an independent society that prospered in peace with its neighbors and its environment. That could remain as such forever.

Not because it’s cool, but because all signs are that the whole world is going to be forced to return to such an arrangement. All things being equal, I’d love to have fresh mangoes flown onto my breakfast table every morning. But it doesn’t look like the world can survive such luxuries. It also looks as if the U.S. is going to be the last nation to catch on, which is going to put it far behind the rest of the developed world in prosperity and quality of life. My hunch is that Vermonters are smarter than this, and if given the chance would be able to take the best of what worked for centuries, combine it with what works now, and create a place and a lifestyle as fine as any civilization that has existed. The only question at stake in independence is whether you’d like to be given that chance.

—ROWAN JACOBSEN
Book Review

Freedom and Unity: A History of Vermont
By Michael Sherman, Gene Sessions, and P. Jeffrey Potash

For anyone wishing to understand the promise of a unique place like Vermont, a new and comprehensive account of the Green Mountain State’s past is a useful starting point. Michael Sherman, Gene Sessions, and P. Jeffrey Potash’s book Freedom and Unity: A History of Vermont offers the traveler a remarkable look at how the Green Mountain State came to be. Don’t let the 700 pages intimidate. The book gracefully runs the reader through a comprehensive history of our little section of the globe—a welcome addition to any historian or Vermontophile’s library.

After examining and dismissing a number of thematic organizing possibilities in the book’s introduction—Vermont’s quasi-mythical founding (embodied by Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys); Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” (which implicitly isolates Vermont as a regional backwater); the “Vermont is too small to make an impact” school of thought (too simplistic on its face); and Vermont “exceptionalism” (a popular view currently espoused, by, among others, this newspaper’s publishers); our intrepid historical trio settle on establishing a thematic framework that explores the historical and cultural tensions between the state of Vermont and the nation as a whole.

And who better to justify such a lens than the famous 19th-century Frenchman, traveler, and writer Alexis de Tocqueville, whom our authors quote early and often? “The great political principles which now rule American society were born and grew up in the state,” wrote de Tocqueville in his seminal 1830s work Democracy in America, “so one must understand the state to gain the key to the rest.” In case this explanation doesn’t satisfy, the book’s introduction gives us the voice of Vermont’s most outspoken secessionist (at least on even-numbered days). Frank Bryan argued for Vermont independence in 1990 in a series of statewide debates with John Dooley, but he switched sides for one of the public discussions and took the opposite position. “Vermont nationalism is a kind of orneriness and that’s the best kind of nationalism,” observed a conflicted Bryan. “America needs us, because we are its conscience and its heart; we are its homeland.”

Bryan has remained on the fence about secession ever since, and 21st-century Vermonters remain torn on the question of Vermont independence in the context of U.S. Empire. Current supporters of Vermont independence are likely to be disappointed by this book, as the word “secession” is only used once (in the book’s beginning). Meanwhile, the fascinating but relatively unexplored story of Vermont’s life as an independent republic (1777–1791) goes missing, subsumed by a larger discussion of the various ways the American Revolution’s “contagion of liberty” affected the ways in which Vermonters saw themselves—politically, economically, and culturally—in the context of an emerging United States. (No surprise; historical tomes often play to the center more than the periphery.)

That said, the book’s authors have done an admirable job of providing a readable account of Vermont’s four centuries of evolution, from “the lure of the land” that marked revolutionary-era struggles; to the “reconfiguration” of Vermont with the coming of the national industrial economy, the railroad, and other epochal changes; to the 20th-century tensions that have altered the Green Mountain landscape: flood, depression, war, the interstate highway system, and population boomlets. Accessible writing, as well as a wide variety of maps, paintings, and photographs, make the book an engaging read throughout.

And what of Vermont’s future? While historians sometimes fancy themselves prophets, our three writers are understandably more cautious about reading the tea leaves. “Part of the experience of Vermont at the turn of the twenty-first century is the continuing and difficult balancing act going on throughout the state between responding to the needs and opportunities of large-scale modern economic development and commerce, mass culture, and mass politics, and making commitments to preserve and nurture small-scale economic, social, and political life,” they conclude. “Through these choices Vermonters continue to explore what it means to be and act as an individual and a citizen in the contemporary world.”

And, of course, determining Vermont’s future is not the job of the historian, or the “expert,” or the traveler, French or otherwise. It is the collective work of all of us who live and love Vermont, and are privileged enough to call this unique and special place our home.

—Rob Williams

continued from page 8
I have just returned from a meeting in Salzburg, Austria, of the “Academic Inn,” an institution of drinking and talking in various pubs and taverns that was initiated more than 30 years ago by a man born just outside that city, a great thinker and luminary, Leopold Kohr.

This year I had the chance to present the audience of some 150 Austrians with an idea of the sentiment for secession boiling up in the U.S. and I read the Middlebury Declaration, all of which was greeted by enthusiasm. Salzburgers already have some sense of being independent, for the state of Salzburg has always been a powerful regional organization within Austria and in many ways it is roughly self-sufficient. They understand the underlying motives for separatism and autonomy.

Leopold Kohr’s most important achievement was a brilliantly argued 250-page book, The Breakdown of Nations, which came out in 1947. It proved that the reasons things either don’t work or are out of control is that they are too big—and this is true of everything, from oversized teeth to global empires. And it showed that, as Aristotle once said, there is a right size to everything, based on the limited capacities of the human body and human brain, and that the restoration of health and serenity everywhere was a return to the human scale—through the breakdown of nations into smaller units where individuals and communities were empowered and invigorated.

The book did not get much attention at first because it ran directly against the tide of the age, which was all for global this and that, and the creation of things like the United Nations. It had a following among a few—the British philosopher Herbert Read, the economist E. F. Schumacher (who called Kohr “a teacher from whom I have learned more than from anyone else”), and a number of academics in Salzburg, who were later to start a Leopold Kohr Akademie—but it did not become popular and was pretty much forgotten, though Kohr continued to write and lecture with the same message.

When I first read the book in 1978 I was so taken with it I got E. P. Dutton to issue a paperback that year, and it had a modest sale, though not as great as Schumacher’s Small Is Beautiful, published three years before. Again it ran against a tide of bigness in the land, yet there were many who could see by that time the futility of the UN, the danger and corruption of big corporations, the evils inherent in a country out of control in Vietnam and Watergate. And Kohr, by then teaching in Wales, was invited several times to give lectures in this country, to enthusiastic audiences who recognized that his was the lonely voice of the truth-teller.

Let me give an example of the Kohrian philosophy (and, jealous though I am of his command of English, the Kohrian style), pertinent to the place where the Academic Inn was held:

“The rural population that built this capital city of barely more than 30,000 for its own enjoyment never numbered more than 120,000. Yet, single-handedly they managed to adorn it with more than 30 magnificent churches, castles, and palaces standing in liled ponds, and an amplitude of fountains, cafes, and inns. And such was their sophisticated taste that they required a dozen theaters, a choir for every church, and an array of composers for every choir, so that it is not surprising that one of the local boys should have been Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

“All this was the result of smallness, achieved with not an iota of foreign. And what a rich city they made it into.”

The reasons things either don’t work or are out of control is that they are too big—and this is true of everything, from oversized teeth to global empires.

It should be obvious by now that Kohr’s message is more vital than ever. It should be obvious that the solution to virtually all the world’s political conflicts and trials is dissolution, devolution, decentralization. I cannot think of one place on earth where a dose of that would not solve, in a permanent way, the difficulties that large-statism and the centralizers have created.

It has been glaringly clear for a long time, for example, that the first step to peace and stability in Iraq was exactly the breakdown of the artificial nation a few British imperialists cobbled together some 70 years ago out of a bunch of tribes and ethnic groups. I think a careful analysis would show that there are more than half a dozen social and political divisions that could stand autonomously, but even without such a study the reality of daily goings-on there shows that there are three major divisions in the country at the moment, the Kurds, the Sunnis, and the Shiites. Instead of trying to force them to have a state altogether, with the aid of a continuing mad war, why not let each go its own way?

The Kurds have already achieved a degree of autonomy, with an independent parliament, separate ministries, and a regional army. They have a strong identity as a separate ethnic population, and have had for generations. With control of some of the northern oil reserves, they could easily be a viable and independent nation. And now it seems there is a new and growing movement for autonomy in the south of Iraq, among the Shiites. The leaders argue that the southern interests got its fair share of oil revenues under Saddam Hussein, even though the bulk of reserves lie near Basra, at the head of the Persian Gulf, and they see no reason to have it all go to some centralized source.

“We want to destroy the central system that connects the entire country to the capital,” one leader, Bakr al-Yasseen, was quoted by The New York Times as saying. He argued that “there’s no democracy in Iraq” and won’t be in any future state, so southern interests would continue to be disregarded.

This movement is demanding the same status as the Kurdish north, with separate institutions and armies. And it is naturally gaining support from the Kurds themselves, who want to see a loose national regime with powerful constituent regions. (A number of Kurds would like to go all the way and have an independent Kurdistan, but this would surely upset powers in Turkey, Syria, and Iran, with Kurdish populations they want to keep control of, so such talk is kept muted.)

The American powers in Iraq are dead set against any move to make a federated state with autonomous regions, because that would be hard for them to control and would risk oil reserves being exploited for the regions rather than a plant nation. Centralizers of the neo-con kind have always found independence and autonomy an anathema, since it threatens their ability to dominate.

But a three-part Iraq simply makes most sense. It would be relatively easy to achieve, it would give each ethnic group its own power and end the insurgency, it would allow U.S. troops to withdraw immediately, and it would make Iraq a viable nation. And at some point it could even lead to creation of three independent nations, on the pattern of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and the states of the old Yugoslavia, and the breakdown of the Soviet Union.

Separatism is not only the tide of this era, it is a true global force. It should be allowed to flow in Iraq, where it will let us end this ugly and debasing war, and then it should be applied at home, where it will let us end this ugly and debasing government.

“Bigness, or oversize,” wrote Kohr, “is really much more than just a social problem. It appears to be the one and only problem permeating all creation. Wherever something is wrong, something is too big.”

No question, something is wrong with this nation. It is too big.”
Protest politics were back in fashion this year at the annual Fourth of July Parade in Warren. Overshadowed in recent years by the wave of patriotism that followed 9/11 and local water issues, the true meaning of freedom and independence was once again the hot topic and float after float expressed discontent with the status quo. Federal leadership, the federal budget, and federal energy policy (not to mention annoying siblings and floaties) were all easy targets, providing a perfect forum for the Second Vermont Republic to promote its cause. Above, SVR’s Thomas Naylor, Ethan Allan (aka Jim Hogue), and Vermont Commons Editor Rob Williams work to distribute nearly 1,000 copies of Vermont Commons to parade spectators.

Fife and drum corps, an F-16 flyover, and plenty of fire engines brought balance to the scene so that the Warren parade was once again the grand celebration of diversity for which it is famous.