The Prodigal Nation: The Case for Vermont’s Secession
By Frank Bryan

“If the principle were to prevail of a common law [i.e., a single government] being in force in the United States . . . it would become the most corrupt government on earth.”
Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Gideon Granger, 1800

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cer the course of the twentieth century the United States were replaced by a confederation of special interests. Indeed, at the center America resembles a League of Interests more than it does a nation. Loyalty, resources, policy, passion and even principle—the elements that comprise the public weal—are now magnetized and drawn not to the commonwealth but to the iron pegs of special interests that have been driven deep into the heart of the republic.

Consequently, the American national government is imploding. In many respects this is a democratic. We must decentralize, deregulate, and draw not to the commonwealth but to the advancement. The idea is that the work of government as it is the Republicans. The problem is that we have systematically undermined the natural homelands where citizens are born, raised, and trained in the art of governance, and with them has gone our democracy. The current buzzword for this lost capacity is social capital, but whatever you call it the result is the same: a continental monolith uncontrolled by its own citizens.

Thus it is the imperialism of Washington inward against its own nation that must be stopped before America can be restored as the planet’s best hope for a just and peaceful world. The problem is not that we don’t know how to lead the world toward democracy; the problem is that we don’t know how to lead ourselves. We don’t even trust ourselves to let ourselves lead ourselves. We have destroyed our own democracy. By what logic can we now argue that we are intellectually and morally equipped to “export” democracy to other regions of the world? Export what democracy?

Fifteen years ago, John McLaughry and I addressed the problem in The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale:

This then is the great American challenge of the twenty-first century: saving the center by shoring up its parts, preserving union by emphasizing disunion, making cosmopolitanism possible by making parochialism necessary, restoring the representative republic by rebuilding direct democracy, strengthening the national character through a rebirth of local citizenship.

Since then the problem has grown worse. Now there is about as much real democracy left in America as there is oil.

And that is where Vermont comes in. For in Vermont one finds a national reserve of social capital and real democracy. It is time for us to act. Waiting for incremental reform is too dangerous. The political establishment shows no inclination to see the handwriting on the wall. This is bipartisan myopia. When George Bush and Ted Kennedy join forces to wrest control of our education system from us and place it in the hands of that intellectual wasteland we call Congress, it is time for something different.

What we need must be radical. It must be dramatic.

We should seriously consider the case for Vermont’s secession from the Union.

My principal concern with such a proposal is that, if successful, a Vermont secession might be followed by other states. We don’t want to destroy America. I, for one, still love it. And I believe that, despite its flaws, America remains our best hope for a peaceful transition from a world of warring nation-states to one of truly united nations. Without stability, democracy is impossible, and until a UN-like institution becomes a keeper of that stability, no other nation on the planet is better suited to bear this responsibility.

The moral underpinning of a secessionist movement is the hope that it will not, in the end, be needed. My hope is that America will give Vermont the opportunity to conduct what Langdon Winner calls “niche analysis.” His hope for societal advancement is to allow certain systems broad latitude in sociopolitical experimentation. We contribute about one-tenth of one percent of the national tax base. Hence while New York or California could not secede without irreparably harming the Union, Vermont can.

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A Voice for Independence

Why this journal, Vermont Commons? And why now?
Vermonters, Americans—indeed, all the world—stand at a widening divide. Not between red and blue, right and left, conservative and liberal, capitalist and socialist, and other such worn political coinage. No, we stand at a truly immense divide: that between our past and our future.

Behind us, an experiment in democracy whose energies are still robust, but whose framework—the modern nation state—teeters in all its towering immensity. Behind us stand the great achievements of the Modernist era, molded by one of history’s great forces: centralization. Raw measures of power—governmental, military, scientific, economic, monetary, corporate—have reached levels of magnitude inconceivable but a generation ago.

Once a merely “continental power,” the United States has morphed into a colossus that spans the entire planet and has a finger in the affairs of all the globe’s nations. Its corporations, banks, currency, media, laws, armies, navies, and covert operations rule the world’s oceans, skies, economies, and its most potent political and cultural norms. Believing in its heavenly mandate, its supreme destiny, it has become a law unto itself among the community of nations, free as any empire before it to devour those whose wealth it craves, or whose rulers give it indulgence. Free under the banner of “Regime Change” to unilaterally act. To shock and to awe.

Was ever an empire different?
Like all those before it, however, this empire depends on abundant natural resources. Abundant means cheap. And it depends most of all on energy, especially oil and natural gas. These fuel the empire’s transportation system, its mechanized food system, and much of its industry, including a sizable portion of its electrical generation systems. Yet it is widely agreed that either now or in the very near future the energy needed to run a modern empire—indeed any industrialized state of any consequence—is about to begin an inexorable climb toward being expensive beyond our experience and imagination. This climb has already begun.

How do we respond? Human inventiveness is always ramped up by necessity, and never more so than when an entire system, whose foundations are always built upon beliefs, collapses. Only a slave to the idea of endless material growth will be paralyzed by fear and rage at the idea of its opposite.

Are we such slaves?
I think not. And so I believe we stand poised at something far greater than a mere “regime change,” or a mere change of government from Republican to Democrat or vice versa. We stand farther out from those tidy, familiar shores. We stand poised to reinvent ourselves.

Not long ago we would have been laughed out of court for trying to insist we Vermonters return to the small scale, to the gore, the village, the town, the block, the neighborhood. To the intimate. To plead for an escape from Big Brother, leering ever closer in our faces, incessantly reminding us that Terror lurks in our yards and that we must fight an Orwellian perpetual war that “will not end in our lifetimes” against an invisible enemy.

But now, in April 2005, and from this moment forward, there are reasons to hope. Fear, as one of our presidents cautioned, is our only real enemy. While the world shakes, and we with it, we need to turn to each other and open our hearts and minds. We need to speak and to listen, to hear and to behold “voices of independence” that rise from the depths of everyone, regardless of education, status, employment, race, gender, creed, from all of us who live here, in this river- and hills-bounded place, our own immortal land: Vermont.

And that is what this new journal is about. How do we return to our roots, with all the new things we have learned in the course of a century, the good and the bad? How can we feed ourselves again; transport ourselves without having to wage wars to do it; light our homes without destroying the lands of others or divesting our children of a safe future? How do we shelter and warm ourselves without laying waste to the land around us, which gives us our peculiar soul as Vermonters; how do we heal and care for our sick without succumbing to debt beyond bearing; how do we educate our children without the gun of federal law leveled at our temples? In this journal we endeavor to explore those issues, and more.

Our bag is full of questions seeking answers. Can we be free again, bound by obligations to real, flesh-and-blood neighbors, harmonized by small-scale relations, nourished by community self-sufficiency, inspired by our own diverse and idiosyncratic creativity? Can we once again be satisfied by the small pleasures of subtle intimacies, day by day? I believe we can.
The door is open.

—Ian Baldwin

Contributors
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Let us begin by treating Wal-Mart with utter respect, by giving credit where it is due. In the course of a few decades it has become the mightiest retailer the world has ever seen. In 2002 it sold $224 billion worth of goods. It is bigger than Target, Sears, J.C. Penney, Safeway, and Kroger combined. It sells more toys, more furniture, more jewelry, more dog food, more flowers, more film, more aspirin than anyone in the world. Were it a country, Wal-Mart’s economy would be the seventeenth or eighteenth largest in the world—larger than Saudi Arabia’s.

And it opens a new store every forty-two hours. It is very eager to open a slew of them in Vermont, currently one of the least Wal-Marted states in the Union. From St. Albans to Bennington, Wal-Mart has its unblinking eye firmly fixed on our state.

The story of its growth is simple. It has achieved its position through one cardinal virtue: Lowest Prices Always. And it has done that in turn by becoming almost unbelievably efficient. It is the acme, the epitome, the zenith of efficiency, unlike anything humans have previously witnessed. If it is successful, there is no question that it will bring Vermonters lower prices. There is no question that it will save us some money at the cash register. How much? The only estimate I’ve seen comes from a UVM economist and Wal-Mart enthusiast named Art Woolf who calculated that it might be as much as $36 million annually. I think that’s a gross overestimate, but let’s take it as gospel truth. That works out to $58.14 apiece.

So the question becomes: is it worth it? What are the costs of going ahead and trying to grab that $58.14?

I’m going to describe what I see as the costs across several different categories. Some will seem far away, others are much more obviously close to home. All reflect Wal-Mart’s enormous efficiency and scale—a scale that so dwarfs the small size of our state that it becomes a central, overwhelming fact. Any of the Big Box stores are out of scale with Vermont; a K-Mart or Costco would be no better. But it’s Wal-Mart that has announced its plans, so it can serve as a useful reference point.

Let’s begin by talking about jobs. For a while, in its early years, Wal-Mart prided itself on being a Buy American store. That is a boast it no longer makes, because now it is just the opposite. Ten percent of all American trade with China goes through Wal-Mart, for instance. Indeed, the Princeton economist Paul Krugman explained recently how crucial it has become in driving the transformation of the American economy. “One of the things that limits or slows the growth of imports is the cost of stabling connections and networks,” he wrote. “Wal-Mart, though, is so big and centralized that it can all at once hook Chinese and other suppliers into its digital system, so Wham, you have a large switch to overseas sourcing in a period much quicker than under the old rules of retailing.”

To imagine what that means to any Vermonter working in a manufacturing industry, consider the

Is it worth it?
example of, say, socks. Their production was centered in the American south in recent years, but now those jobs have all but disappeared. Carolina Mills, for instance, shrunk from seventeen factories to seven in the last three years. Why? Because, in the words of one company executive, the company couldn’t compete with low-wage Chinese workers even “if we paid our workers nothing at all.” The items we still make are vulnerable as well. Tombstones from China are now undercutting the Barre product, even though that means shipping chunks of rock halfway around the globe.

Now, in effect you could say Wal-Mart was unpatriotic. But is it doing this because it hates America? No, not at all. Rather, because patriotism would be inefficient. It would raise prices. The logic of Wal-Mart’s operation doesn’t allow it. And if logic doesn’t allow it to care about American factories, it certainly doesn’t allow it to care about Vermont factories.

And it doesn’t allow Wal-Mart to care about the workers in its overseas factories either, of course. When a team of reporters from the Los Angeles Times went to a garment factory in rural Honduras, they found workers like Isabell Reyes, who has worked at the plant for eleven years, ten hours a day. Each year the quote of sleeves that she has to sew keeps increasing, because Wal-Mart puts pressure on the factory to reduce their prices. At the moment she must deliver 1,200 garments a day—a shirt sleeve every fifteen seconds. At thirty-seven she can no longer lift a cooking pot or hold her infant daughter because of the inflammation in her hands. She makes $35 a week. And by Wal-Mart standards that may make her overweight. The owner of the factory where she works—and Wal-Mart is its biggest customer—says Wal-Mart shaves the price it is willing to pay by a few cents each year.

In Bangladesh, factory owners say Wal-Mart has demanded they cut prices by as much as half in recent years. I’ve been to Bangladesh, seen those factories, seen the lives of the people who work in them. But even that kind of degradation is not efficient enough. More and more frequently, Wal-Mart is moving its business out of places like Bangladesh and Honduras, moving it mostly to China—and even there it plays one region off against another. What does it like about China? The best case study might be provided by Iowa, which from 1983 to 1993 suffered the kind of total invasion that Wal-Mart has planned for Vermont. In that one decade, Iowa lost 553 grocery stores, 298 hardware stores, 293 building-supply stores, 161 variety stores, 158 women’s apparel stores, 153 boy’s apparel stores.

For undisclosed amounts, and more than forty other such cases are now awaiting trial. Federal agents have raided sixty-one stores across the country to seize evidence that subcontractors were cheating janitors who were illegal immigrants out of overtime pay. Meanwhile, the largest class-action suit in history for sex bias is now pending against the company. If you want to know what life is like as a Wal-Mart employee, may I recommend Barbara Ehrenreich’s book Nickel and Dimed?

Less than half the workers at Wal-Mart are covered by its medical plan. If you want to know what that means, look at the rolls for, say, the state of Georgia’s program for uninsured children. According to the Atlanta Journal Constitution, per capita, the kids of Wal-Mart employees “dominate” the plan. In essence, the cost of their health care has been shifted from the company to the state. If you didn’t do these things, that $58.14 wouldn’t be there. And Wal-Mart is stuck with its own logic. If it raises prices to pay better wages, customers trained by its philosophy will defect to the imitators it has spawned. So its low salaries will not disappear—in fact, Wal-Mart recently closed one Quebec store the moment its employees voted to unionize in search of higher benefits.

All of this, of course, assumes that you still have a job once Wal-Mart moves in. A series of academic studies in recent years has shown that, indeed, the average new Wal-Mart store employed 140 people—but that it simultaneously employed 230 people. How is this possible? It’s simple. Look at what Wal-Mart does to all the other businesses where you trade at the moment, and the men and women who own and staff them.

The best case study might be provided by Iowa, which from 1983 to 1993 suffered the kind of total invasion that Wal-Mart has planned for Vermont. In that one decade, Iowa lost 553 grocery stores, 298 hardware stores, 293 building-supply stores, 161 variety stores, 158 women’s apparel stores, 153 shoe stores, 116 drug stores, and 111 men’s and boy’s apparel stores.

It would be easy to imagine that Wal-Mart hated those merchants, hated those villages whose business districts it depopulated. After all, employees in its early days were sometimes told to chant one of the company’s slogans:

- Stack it deep
- Sell it cheap
- Stack it high
- See it fly
- Hear those downtown merchants cry.

In fact, though, Wal-Mart bears no real grudge against the towns and small cities it devastates. That
devastation is merely the logical outcome of this process of efficiency. It is not as efficient to have 230 workers receiving decent wages and health care in twenty storefronts downtown to do the work and move the merchandise of 140 poverty-wage workers in one big box outside of town.

It should be noted, by the way, that the Wal-Marts that devastated Iowa were merely giant. They were not the Super Wal-Marts the company now favors, which cover an even vaster array of retail categories. And it should be noted that direct competitors are not the only ones who suffer. Wal-Mart doesn’t need the services of local accountants, or lawyers, or graphic designers—all those things come from company HQ back in Arkansas. Wal-Mart doesn’t even advertise very much—why would it need to once it’s driven out the competition?

One way I imagine this is to hear in my mind the ads on WDEV in between innings of the Red Sox games. Lenny’s Shoe and Apparel, Lacallade Lumber, Lantmann’s IGA, and so on. I can imagine them gone, because that’s what happens everywhere else. And as they go, even the bonanzas in tax revenues that local officials dream of dry up and disappear. Even in towns that hosted Wal-Marts, total retail sales dropped an average of 4 percent. And, of course, the towns next door were devastated—sales fell 15 percent on average. Property values often fall as Wal-Marts move in, and with them tax receipts. Most profoundly, the money that pours into that line of cash registers at the front of the Wal-Mart doesn’t stick around town. What isn’t paid out in poverty-level wages simply disappears at the end of each working day, sucked back to Arkansas as if by a giant vacuum. If you shop at a local store, the profits recirculate about 2.3 times in the community.

So you do the math. Figure out about that $58.14.

It may seem odd that I’ve barely mentioned the environmental effect of all these big-box stores, since that’s often the first charge leveled against them. Partly that’s because the effect is so obvious—if you can’t see what it means to hollow out your downtown and build acre upon acre of parking lot in the surrounding farmland, then I’m unlikely to persuade you.

But partly it’s because those environmental effects are, in a different way, subtle, so subtle as to defy the kind of analysis I’ve been making here. The biggest environmental issue, and perhaps the biggest spiritual issue, that we face is the unflagging epic of consumption in which we are now engaged. Partly that’s because the effect is so obvious—if you can’t see what it means to hollow out your downtown and build acre upon acre of parking lot in the surrounding farmland, then I’m unlikely to persuade you.

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The biggest reason I’ve not been talking about the environment explicitly is that I’ve actually been talking about the environment all along. Community—the solidarity of human communities—is at the heart of what environmental hope we have. The idea that we might learn to take more of our pleasure and satisfaction from each other and less from our stuff. Everything that Wal-Mart does undermines community, because a community cannot exist if everybody does is maximize their own pleasure and profit at all times. A community demands a tolerance of old and young, of healthy and sick, of different ideas and different abilities. It demands a concern for stability, a concern for the lives of others. Others near us, whose suffering we will see if Wal-Mart moves in and destroys the businesses that pay them a living wage, and others far away, whose suffering we can build huge big-box stores if the inevitable result of a kind of out-of-control efficiency, of a mill that grinds finer with each passing quarter.

Are there alternatives? Sure. Cities and towns can do much to keep Wal-Mart at bay. St. Albans passed a zoning change that would limit new businesses to 50,000 square feet. Unfortunately they waited until Wal-Mart had already filed its application for a 150,000-square-foot store. Other Vermont towns could survive and total efficiency, of a mill that grinds finer with each passing quarter.

Vermont is in the almost unique position of still having downtowns worth saving, of still having some real community, some working democracy. But all of it is small enough that it can be easily overwhelmed by something as huge as Wal-Mart (or, for that matter, K-Mart, or any other Mega-sized outfit). Here’s what two University of Pennsylvania professors found in a study published last year: “The presence of Wal-Mart unequivocally raised family poverty rates in U.S. counties during the 1990s relative to places that had no such stores. This was true not only as a consequence of existing stores in a county in 1987, but it was also an independent outcome of the location of new stores between 1987 and 1997 . . . Wal-Mart transfers income from the working poor and from tax-payers through welfare-programs directed at the poor to stockholders and the heirs of the Wal-Mart fortune.” It doesn’t get much more direct than that.

Wal-Mart has done us a great favor. It has forced us to ask, with far more urgency than usual, whether the scale of this place, with its neighborliness, its landscape, its way of life, is worth preserving. Whether it’s worth $58.14. Wal-Mart wages nothing can stand in the way of its efficiency. I think we can.
have gradually undermined the 10th Amendment. It now bears little relevance to the configuration of American Federalism in the 1990s.

When the Supreme Court held in 1985 that Congress could control the way localities in the states deal with their own municipal employees, a dissenting judge said, “All that stands between the remaining essentials of state sovereignty and Congress is the latter’s underdeveloped capacity for self-restraint.” Several years ago, Vermont decided it was hopeless to pursue a case before the courts whereby we sought to retain our right to set a retirement age for our own judges. And when the feds want control over something so clearly—a state’s right that even the most centrist judge can’t find a way to make it “constitutional,” Congress takes the right away by threatening to withhold our own money from us. These are called “crossover sanctions.” In the 1980s Ronald Reagan, in an act of mind-wrenching hypocrisy, convinced Congress to withhold highway repair funds from states like Vermont unless we raised our drinking age to twenty-one.

Vermont’s patience with the federal government is more commendable still when one understands that there is no state in the Union as historically predisposed to secession as Vermont. Vermont was America’s first frontier. It was born free, never a colony of the Crown, never a territory of some distant power. For fourteen years

United States, a Vermonter named Calvin Coolidge, offered federal help. Replied Vermont’s Governor John Weeks, “Vermont will take care of its own.”

A few years later the nation offered to bail Vermont out of the Depression with what would have been the biggest public works program in the history of the state—an asphalt highway down the top of Vermont’s famed Green Mountains, every square inch of tar poured above the 2500 foot mark. Nope, said Vermont to an astonished America. We will not have our lofty peaks hitched together with pavement. In the most democratic expression of environmental consciousness in American history, Vermonters assembled in their town meetings in March of 1936 and voted to reject the proposal and all the federal loot that went with it. In the 1960s, Vermont’s innovative and highly emulated land-use reforms protected this land from any development.

In September 1941 the Vermont legislature passed a law providing funds for Vermont soldiers to fight Japan two months before the bombs fell on Pearl Harbor. We declared war on Japan before Washington did.

No state, including Texas, can match Vermont’s thirst for independence. Still, to think about secession conjures up the worst kind of imaginings. But they are false fears. Consider the most common arguments:

“Vermont secession movement was getting under-way in the early 1990s, I pointed out that what the government had recently lost in the FMHA, HUD, and S&L scandals would take every cent of Vermont’s tax money from then until the year 2052 to pay back. Our contribution to the national government for the next half-century has already been spent. Better put, it has already been lost.

About the time seven of the seven Vermont communities given the opportunity to urge Vermont to secede from the union voted to do just that, I spoke at Blue Mountain High School in Wells River. The occasion: the burning of their mortgage for the new school building. They were debt free. These good people in their three little towns with their little school and burdened with big property taxes bailed up every year for twenty years and paid back what they owed, principal plus interest.

In Washington the interest on the debt threatens to take one-third of our tax money each year. To retire the debt would require a stack of thousand dollar bills more than two hundred miles high. Leaving the Union will involve the breaking of no promises. Our contract with America made two hundred years ago has been repeatedly ignored by a national government with an unquenchable thirst for power. When we signed on, the American Constitution ensured us that “The powers not delegated to the U.S. by the Constitution nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people.” Is there anyone left in America today over the age of six who does not understand that the reserved power clause has become a joke? The author of a leading college textbook puts it this way: “Actions by Congress and the Federal Courts (1777-1791) it existed as an independent republic doing those things nations did in those days—coining money, raising armies, engaging in foreign relations. No state, including Texas, governed itself more thoroughly or longer before giving up its nationhood and joining the Union. In fact, Vermont and Texas are the only states to claim any experience at nationhood. (And we were smart enough not to put all our guys in one fort!) We joined the Union free and clear in 1791, the fourteenth state.

So our independent spirit has survived.

We sat out the War of 1812, our beef cows feeding the British army in Canada—a move we can remind our northern neighbor of during secession. We also ignored the Fugitive Slave Act. Vermont Supreme Court Justice Theophilus Harrington demanded a “Bill of Sale from the Almighty” before he would return a runaway slave.

In 1867 Vermont provided a staging ground for the Irish Fenians, who attacked Canada from Franklin, Vermont. United States marshals had been sent to Vermont to halt the process. We ignored them.

In 1917, before America declared war on Germany, Vermont did so, by appropriating one million dollars (real money in those days) for war against Germany. The largest newspaper in the state editorialized that if Vermont insisted on fighting the Germans all by herself, we should raise taxes instead of issuing bonds to pay for it.

Earlier, Vermont’s governor had made the following public promise: “If America goes to war, Vermont will surely follow.”

In 1927 the worst national disaster in the state’s history struck. After the flood, the President of the

Vermont is too small to be a nation again.

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

Vermont’s tiny economy would be swallowed up by giant international trading systems.

In actuality, small nations have great advantages in the international marketplace. Gary S. Becker, a highly respected University of Chicago professor, writes, “Bigger isn’t necessarily better. . . . Smaller countries tend to be more nimble traders in international markets, offsetting their lack of economies of scale.” Vermont products have always had a special mystique. They are prized outside Vermont as much for what we are as for what they are. Anyone who thinks Vermont ice cream or Vermont maple syrup or Vermont cheese would suffer if Vermont became the Switzerland of North America needs to read an introductory textbook on marketing.

A little state like Vermont is too dependent on the federal dole to go it alone.

Question: would you rather have $10,000 to spend any way you want or $11,500 that you have to spend as I say? Vermont’s return on its tax dollar from the federal government is much smaller than most people believe. A fair estimate is that we get
back about $1.15 for every dollar we pay in. And even this small positive ratio is declining.

When one considers the hassle one must go through to get that extra 15 cents on a dollar (grant applications, dealings with the federal bureaucracy), the benefit of federal money may already be nil. Much of the money we get from Washington we spend on things we don’t need in order to get funds for things we do need. And don’t forget that every dime we get back over and above what we pay in is apt to be borrowed money (deficit money).

Even some of the original dollar we get back for each dollar we put in probably comes back in bad (borrowed) money. In other words, Vermont’s “great deal” looks like this: for every dollar Vermonters pay in federal taxes, we get most of it back in cash but the rest in the form of a loan the government has extracted from the American people, which includes us. If we kept our original buck we wouldn’t have to make out applications to the federal government in order to spend it, and if we needed more we could decide whether or not to borrow it on our own terms. Best of all, we could spend the whole damn thing as we see fit.

It is true that Vermont benefits from something we might call “national infrastructure,” the most obvious examples of which are the military and the interstate highways. But think of the 1.3 billion Vermont tax dollars that go toward U.S. defense-related expenditures each year. Vermont will need no army after secession. A couple of dozen more state troopers and a militia organized from local fire and rescue organizations, at no expense to the Republic, will be enough. Think we could come up with some other ways to spend that 1.3 billion?

If we tried to secede, the United States would invade. American tanks rolling into Bennington? It’ll never happen. All we have to do is simply assert our independence and leave. Our very act of secession will be our greatest strength. We have an open border to the north with a country that owes us for our benign neglect during the War of 1812 and to a province of that country with secessionist ideas of its own.

It takes big government to solve big issues. My opponent in the 1991 secession debates, Vermont Supreme Court Justice John Dooley, stated that, “Acid rain won’t be ended by cute little nations like a new Republic of Vermont.” Wrong. The history of the last two decades has shown an increasing incapacity of the federal government to make progress where real conflicts among the states exist. Mediocrity is the best you can hope for when problems and benefits are diffused over large systems.

The federal government likes to “facilitate” cooperation and then take credit for natural impulses for consensus that are locally inspired. It is the states and localities that are “putting Washington to shame,” as one publication put it, in the field of environmental protection. In Vermont we find again and again that Washington is a hindrance to attempts to protect the environment. It can be argued, for instance, that the federal government caused the acid rain problem because it was forced to compromise over smokestacks and scrubbers when it sought to protect Midwestern cities from their own pollution in the 1970s.

The fact of the matter is that Vermont’s influence as an independent republic would be vastly greater than even the best efforts of our senators in Washington can produce. International cooperation rather than intranational action is the emerging dynamic in environmental policy. The twenty-first century must develop a global perspective on the environment. Both Vermont and the world of nations would benefit from our active and equal participation in this.

What About the Bill of Rights?

Many of the people attending the secession debates seemed worried about giving up the protections guaranteed under the Bill of Rights in the Federal Constitution. One wonders why Vermont’s record on civil rights and liberties is far stronger than America’s. It was our constitution that first outlawed slavery. It was our constitution that first provided universal voting rights for all freemen.

It was Vermont that provided much of the leadership in the anti-slavery movement. Lincoln fought the war to save the Union. Vermont fought the war to free the slaves.

It was from Vermont that the first anti-Christian book ever published on the North American continent was penned.

It was a Vermont Senator that led the fight to censure McCarthy. It was in Vermont that gays were first provided the opportunity to form civil unions. It is in Vermont that a citizen’s Bill of Rights guarantees to keep and bear arms is strongly defended—not for hunting, not for personal protection against wayward citizens, but for what it was intended: to insure that free citizens always have a means to protect themselves against governments, a protection that takes on special meaning as our civil liberties come under attack from Washington, the center of our own nation, our beloved America.

Yes, our beloved America.

But America has gone astray. It needs to be brought home. And what better place to come home to than Vermont, about which the great historian Bernard DeVoto wrote, “There is no more Yankee than Polynesian in me, but when I go to Vermont I feel like I am traveling toward my own place.”

We say to America: We love you, but we love our democracy more. Come back when you are ready to let us practice democracy in the way you promised us you would when we first agreed to this joint enterprise in 1791. In the meantime, we hereby politely and peacefully excuse ourselves.

I, for one, hope America heeds our call and, like the Bible’s prodigal child, soon comes back to us. •

“The gods of the hills are not the gods of the valleys!”
— Ethan Allen
Few Americans were aware that when the dean of the American diplomatic corps, George F. Kennan, died on March 17 at the age of 101, he had become a staunch advocate of the peaceful dissolution of the American empire and of the fledgling Vermont independence movement. Although best known as the father of “containment,” the mainstay of American Cold War policy, Kennan first revealed his radical decentralist tendencies in his 1993 book *Around the Cragged Hill*.

We are, if territory and population be looked at together, one of the great countries of the world—a monster country, one might say, along with such others as China, India, the recent Soviet Union, and Brazil. And there is a real question as to whether “bigness” in a body politic is not an evil in itself, quite aside from the policies pursued in its name.

Although virtually unnoticed by the media, Ambassador Kennan came right to the brink of calling for the peaceful break-up of the United States in this book.

I have often diverted myself, and puzzled my friends, by wondering how it would be if our country, while retaining certain of the rudiments of a federal government, were to be decentralized into something like a dozen constituent republics, absorbing not only the powers of the existing states but a considerable part of those of the present federal establishment. I could conceive of something like nine states of the existing states but a considerable number of self-governing urban regions, those of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles—a total of twelve constituent entities. To these entities I would accord a larger part of the present federal powers than one might suspect—large enough, in fact, to make most people gasp.

About American imperialism, Kennan had this to say in the same book:

There is a further quality of greatness of size in a country that deserves mention here. One might define it as the hubris of inordinate size. It is a certain lack of modesty in the national self-image of the great state—a feeling that the nation’s role in the world must be equivalent to its physical size, with the consequent relative tendency to overweening pretensions and ambitions. I don’t mean to say that the great power is always and everywhere imperialistic. But there have been times, to be sure, when the United States was very much that.

Between February 7, 2001 and February 14, 2003, I received ten letters from Ambassador Kennan and several telephone calls. The subject was always the same—secession, the peaceful dissolution of the United States with Vermont leading the way. Kennan was a closet secessionist.

In January 2001 I sent him a copy of my book with William H. Willimon entitled *Downsizing the U.S.A.*, a book which unabashedly called for Vermont independence as a first step towards the peaceful break-up of the Union. On February 7, 2001, Ambassador Kennan responded,

There can be no doubt of the closeness of many of our views. But we are, I fear, a lonely band; until some of the things we have written are discovered by what we may hope will be a more thoughtful and serious generation of critics and reviewers, I am afraid we will remain that way.

I, in any case, being just on the eve of my 97th birthday, can no longer look forward to continuing the battle. Writing is itself becoming difficult for me.

Let me wish you well in your own struggle for understanding. Much of your thinking must at last, I feel, break through.

On October 22, 2001, Ambassador Kennan dictated the following letter from his sick bed.

I am, for reasons of age and health, not normally able to reply in person to incoming letters. I am, however, trying to make an exception in the case of your recent letter (I seem, unfortunately to have mislaid) because the content of it interests me greatly at this final stage in my life, and I have a few thoughts about it that I would like to see put into written form before it becomes too late.

You cited in your letter, if my memory is correct, the views of a lady in Maine who urged the establishment of independence for the three states of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont and their union with certain political entities of Canada to form something resembling a northeast federative state, separated from both the U.S. and Canada. And while I cannot comment on that part of this vision that suggests the inclusion of what are at present parts of Canada (I know too little about them), I write to say that in the idea of the three American states’ ultimate independence, whether separately or in union, I see nothing fanciful and nothing towards the realization of which the efforts of enlightened people might not be usefully directed. Such are at present the dominating trends in the U.S. that I can see no other means of ultimate preservation of cultural and societal values that will be not only endangered but eventually destroyed in an endlessly prolonged association of the northern parts of New England with the remainder of what is now the U.S.A.

Let me having said that, now add a few thoughts, some of a cautionary nature, the others essentially encouraging. Any attempt to separate territories from the remainder of the U.S. could, if it were to be any less than tragically unsuccessful, have to be gradual and protracted. It has long been an established principle in my own mind that no abrupt attempt at change (or even ostensibly achieved change) in the lives of entire peoples can have enduring useful effects. To be successful, changes of this nature must proceed in close companionship with comparable developments in the minds and customs of the peoples in whose lives they are to take place; and such changes take time and patience. For this reason the changes that the lady from Maine envisaged could, if they are going to have any prospects for enduring success, only be slow ones, gradually and patiently pursued. With this in mind, it occurs to me that those who would like to see such changes brought about could do worse than to study and consider the protracted historical process, both patient and non-violent, by which the Canadians succeeded in extracting themselves from the original dependence upon London and achieving complete independence. . . .

I offer these thoughts to you, for whatever they are worth. My present state of health excludes any possibility of my writing about any of this for publication. But I thought that you, more than anyone else of my acquaintance, ought to know the directions in which my thoughts are leading at this late stage in my own life.

With all best wishes I remain,

Sincerely,

George Kennan

On May 1, 2002, Mr. Kennan wrote, “All power to Vermont in its efforts to distinguish itself from the USA as a whole, and to pursue in its own way the cultivation of its own tradition.”

By far the most poignant of all the letters which I received from Professor Kennan was a handwritten one dated August 1, 2002. In the concluding paragraph he said,

I continue to be of poor and deteriorating health, and too much should not be looked for from me. But my enthusiasm for what you are trying to do in Vermont remains undiminished; and I am happy for any small support I can give to it.

My last letter from Ambassador Kennan was written on February 14, 2003, two days before his 99th birthday and just prior to the beginning of the war with Iraq. In this letter he expressed concern about the negative political impact which the war might have on the Vermont independence movement.

Although I never heard from him again, George Kennan was a major source of inspiration for the Second Vermont Republic, Vermont’s thriving independence movement. In every sense of the word, he was truly the godfather of the movement. •
Collapse of the American Empire

It is quite ironic: only a decade or so after the idea of the United States as an imperial power came to be accepted by both right and left, and people were able to talk openly about an American empire, it is showing multiple signs of its inability to continue. Indeed, it is now possible to contemplate its collapse.

The neocons in power in Washington these days, who were delighted to talk about America as the sole empire in the world following the Soviet disintegration, will of course refuse to believe in any such collapse. But I think it behooves us to examine seriously the ways in which the U.S. system is so drastically imperiling itself that it will cause not only the collapse of its worldwide empire but vast changes on the domestic front as well.

All empires eventually collapse. Sumerian, Persian, Greek, Roman, Hapsburg, British, Soviet, you name them, they all fell, and most within a few hundred years. The reasons are not really complex. An empire is a kind of state system that makes the same mistakes simply by nature of its structure and inevitably fails because of its size, complexity, territorial reach, stratification, domination, and inequalities.

In my reading of the history of empires, I see four reasons that explain their collapse. Let me set them out, in reference to the present American empire.

1. Environmental Degradation

Empires end by destroying the lands and waters they depend upon for survival, largely because they build and farm and grow without limits. Ours is no exception, even if we have yet to experience the worst of our assaults on nature. Science is in agreement that all important ecological indicators are in decline and have been so for decades. As the Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson has said, after lengthy examination of human impact on the earth, our “ecological footprint is already too large for the planet to sustain, and it is getting larger.” A Defense Department study last year predicted “abrupt climate change,” likely to occur within the decade, leading to “catastrophic” shortages of water and energy, endemic “disruption and conflict,” warfare that “would define human life,” and a “significant drop” in the planet’s ability to sustain its present population. End of empire for sure, maybe end of civilization.

2. Economic Meltdown

Empires depend on excessive resource exploitation, usually derived from colonies farther and farther away from the center, and eventually fall when the resources are exhausted or become too expensive for all but the elite. This is the exact path we are on. Our economy is built on a fragile system in which the world produces and we, by and large, consume. At the moment we sustain a nearly $630 billion trade deficit with the rest of the world. It has leapt by an incredible $500 billion since 1993, and $180 billion since George Bush took office in 2001. In order to pay for that, we require an inflow of cash from the rest of the world of about $1 billion every day. That kind of excess is simply unsustainable, especially when you realize that it is the other world empire, China, that is supporting it, to the tune of some $83 billion on loan to the U.S. Treasury.

Add to that an economy resting on a nearly $500 billion federal budget deficit, making up part of the total national debt of $7.4 trillion as of fall 2004. Nobody thinks that is sustainable either, which is why the dollar is losing value fast, and the world is beginning to lose faith in the American empire. The American empire, which began its worldwide reach well before Bush II, now has some 446,000 active troops at the source of their greatest triumphs over the rest of the world. It has leapt by an incredible $500 billion since 1993, and $180 billion since George Bush took office in 2001. In order to pay for that, we require an inflow of cash from the rest of the world of about $1 billion every day. That kind of excess is simply unsustainable, especially when you realize that it is the other world empire, China, that is supporting it, to the tune of some $83 billion on loan to the U.S. Treasury.

3. Military Overstretch

Empires are by definition colonizers, always forced to extend their military reach farther and farther, and enlarge it against unwilling colonies more and more, until coffers are exhausted, troops are unreliable, and the periphery can no longer be controlled. The American empire, which began its worldwide reach well before Bush II, now has some 446,000 active troops at the source of their greatest triumphs over the rest of the world. It has leapt by an incredible $500 billion since 1993, and $180 billion since George Bush took office in 2001. In order to pay for that, we require an inflow of cash from the rest of the world of about $1 billion every day. That kind of excess is simply unsustainable, especially when you realize that it is the other world empire, China, that is supporting it, to the tune of some $83 billion on loan to the U.S. Treasury.

If this is so, and his examples certainly support it, then we can isolate the values that have been responsible for American society’s greatest triumphs and know that we will cling to them no matter what. They are, in one rough mixture, capitalism, individualism, nationalism, technophilia, and humanism (as the dominance of humans over nature). There is no chance, no matter how grave and obvious the threat, that as a society we will abandon those.

Hence no chance to escape the collapse of empire.

4. Domestic Upheaval

Traditional empires collapse from within as well as often being attacked from without. So far the level of dissent within the United States has not reached the point of rebellion or secession—thanks both to the increasing repression of dissent and escalation of fear in the name of “homeland security” and to the success of our modern version of bread and circuses: a unique combination of entertainment, consumption, drugs, and religion that effectively deadens the general public into a stupor.

It’s hard to believe that the great mass of the American public would ever bestir itself to challenge the empire at home until things get much, much worse. It is a public, after all, of which a 2004 Gallup poll found that 61 percent believe that “religion can answer all or most of today’s problems.” According to a 2002 Time/CNN poll, 59 percent believe in the imminent apocalypse foretold in the Book of Revelation and take every threat and disaster as evidence of God’s will.

And yet, it’s also hard to believe that a nation so thoroughly corrupt as this, resting on a social and economic base of intolerably unequal incomes and property, will be able to sustain itself for long. The upsurge in talk about secession after the last election, some of which is deadly serious, indicates that at least a minority is willing to think about drastic steps to “alter or abolish” an empire it finds itself fundamentally at odds with.

Those four processes by which empires fall seem to me to be inescapable, in varying degrees, in this latest empire. And I think a combination of them will bring about its collapse within the next fifteen years or so.

Jared Diamond’s recent book Collapse details the ways societies crumble and suggests that American society, or industrial civilization as a whole, can learn from the failures of the past and avoid such fates. But it will never happen, for a reason Diamond himself explains. As he says, in his analysis of the doomed Norse society of Greenland that collapsed in the early fifteenth century, “The values to which people cling most stubbornly under inappropriate conditions are those values that were previously the source of their greatest triumphs over adversity.”

If this is so, and his examples certainly support it, then we can isolate the values that have been responsible for American society’s greatest triumphs and know that we will cling to them no matter what. They are, in one rough mixture, capitalism, individualism, nationalism, technophilia, and humanism (as the dominance of humans over nature). There is no chance, no matter how grave and obvious the threat, that as a society we will abandon those.

Hence no chance to escape the collapse of empire.
Letters, News, and Upcoming Events

Original Vermont Declaration of Independence Found—In Washington!

Vermonters can be forgiven for not knowing that their state was an independent republic from 1777 to 1791, especially since the document declaring independence had mysteriously vanished. In their effort to establish a Vermont Independence Day, John and Linda Whitney of Essex Junction searched the Vermont Historical Society and state archives, but neither the original declaration of independence nor even a copy could be found. The only record on file was the minutes of the January 16, 1777, meeting at which the declaration was passed. After an exhaustive search of the state, the Whitneys finally located the original three-page document at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Copies can now be seen at the state archives and historical society, or online at vtcommons.org. The Whitneys hope that schools and libraries across the state will soon be displaying Vermont’s Declaration of Independence.

January Declared Vermont Independence Month

Vermont took a major step toward independence in March when both the House and the Senate easily passed resolutions declaring January Vermont History and Independence Month. The original proposal had been to declare January 15 Vermont Independence Day, but apparently the legislature decided Vermont was such an independent place that we needed a whole month to do the concept justice. Festivities are being planned for January 2006, with local businesses using the month to focus tourists’ attention on the state, schools taking the opportunity to educate students about Vermont’s past as a sovereign entity, and citizens throughout the state celebrating Vermont’s future as a sovereign entity.

Second Vermont Republic to Meet June 11

There will be a meeting of the Second Vermont Republic June 11 at 1 p.m. at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier at 130 Main Street. The public is welcome. There will be a one-hour presentation on the Hawaiian independence movement by John Olsen, an activist long associated with the cause, followed by the meeting of the SVR from 2–5. Informal discussion will continue at Langdon Street Café afterward.

Towns Protest Iraq War

On Town Meeting Day, 49 towns in Vermont passed resolutions expressing opposition to the war in Iraq and calling for members of the Vermont National Guard to be withdrawn immediately. As an independent republic, Vermont would have sole control over deployment of its guardsmen.

Participate in Interactive Media!

People often decry television’s lack of interactivity—rather than a two-way communication and sharing of information, it is simply a one-way monologue. But, as Vermont Commons Associate Publisher Rob Williams shows here, there are plenty of ways of interacting with your television. Some types of interactive media require less work than others. If you want to get started, try sending us a letter, telling us what you think about the notion of Vermont independence, or post your thoughts online at the Vermont Commons blog: www.vtcommons.org.

Books

Confessions of an Economic Hit Man
By John Perkins

Every once in a while, a book comes along that confirms one’s suspicions about the way the world really works. John Perkins’s Confessions of an Economic Hit Man is such a book. What is an EHМ? Perkins explains:

Economic hit men are highly paid professionals who cheat countries around the globe out of trillions of dollars. They funnel money from the World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and foreign “aid” organizations into the coffers of huge corporations and the pockets of a few wealthy families who control the planet’s natural resources. Their tools include fraudulent financial reports, rigged elections, payoffs, extortion, sex, and murder. They play a game as old as empire, but one that has taken on new and terrifying dimensions during this time of globalization. I should know; I was an EHМ.

As an imperial whistleblower, Perkins highlights the role of corporate media in constructing “realities” Americans imagine about themselves and their role in the world—“realities” that mask deeper and more troublesome truths. “Things are not as they appear,” writes Perkins. “Most of our newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses are owned—and manipulated—by gigantic international corporations.” U.S. mainstream commercial media make up an important part of the “corporatocracy,” a term Perkins coins to describe “a vast network that promotes U.S. commercial interests.”

How did the United States find itself an imperial colossus astride the world stage? The Almighty’s blessing? Our love of “freedom”? Our practice of “democracy”? Superior genes? Perkins’ truth is more disturbing. During the past several decades, government elites have collaborated with the leaders of powerful multinational corporations to wield policies that have lined the pockets of some of the world’s most wealthy families—Bush in the United States, Saud in the Middle East, to name but two. EHМs like Perkins comprise the vanguard—those who carried out these policies in the name of “economic development,” “globalization,” and all the other familiar buzzwords designed to soothe. If economic pressure fails, elites send in the military to “liberate” a country’s people from the clutches of an “oppressive government,” or call on the CIA or the “jacksals” to assassinate democratically elected leaders who refuse to toe the imperial line. Perkins argues that the “war of liberation” in Iraq, now two years underway, is but another step in elites’ plan to maintain U.S. imperial mandates in a strategic part of the world for as long as possible, regardless of the human or financial costs.

If you are truly interested in cutting through all of the media blather about “globalization,” “freedom,” “democracy,” and the “war on terror” to discover the deeper and unsettling truths, then read Confessions of an Economic Hit Man.

—Rob Williams
Vermont's Declaration of Independence, signed on January 16, 1777, in Westminster, asserting Vermont to be free from New York, New Hampshire, Great Britain, and any other power.

Image courtesy of Vermont State Archives.
The Second Vermont Republic

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Second Vermont Republic?
The Second Vermont Republic is a peaceful, democratic, grassroots, libertarian populist movement opposed to the tyranny of the U.S. Government, corporate America, and globalization and committed to the return of Vermont to its rightful status as an independent republic, as it was between 1777 and 1791.

What is the primary objective of the movement?
Independence. To extricate Vermont peacefully, legally, and democratically from the United States as soon as possible and create an independent nation-state based on the Swiss model.

Does that mean secession?
Yes.

Why does Vermont want to secede?
First, the United States suffers from imperial overstretch and has become unsustainable politically, economically, agriculturally, socially, culturally, and environmentally. Second, Vermont finds it increasingly difficult to protect itself from the debilitating effects of big business, big agriculture, big markets, and big government, who want all of us to be the same—just like they are. Third, the U.S. Government has lost its moral authority because it is owned, operated, and controlled by corporate America. Fourth, American foreign policy, which is based on the doctrine of full-spectrum dominance, is immoral, illegal, unconstitutional, and in violation of the United Nations charter. Fifth, as long as Vermont remains in the Union, its citizens face curtailed civil liberties, the risk of terrorist attack, and the risk of military conscription of its youth.

But isn’t secession unconstitutional?
No. “Whenever any form of government becomes destructive, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government,” said Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence. Just as a group has a right to form, so too does it have a right to disband, to subdivide itself, or withdraw from a larger unit. The U.S. Constitution does not forbid secession.

According to the tenth amendment, that which is not expressly prohibited by the Constitution is allowed. All states have a Constitutional right to secede.

To which other principles does the Second Vermont Republic subscribe?
Direct democracy, Swiss federalism, sustainability, economic solidarity, quality education, humane health care, nonviolence, political neutrality, and international solidarity with its neighbors New Hampshire, Maine, Quebec, and the Atlantic provinces of Canada. Notwithstanding its policy of neutrality, the Second Vermont Republic does not rule out some form of political alliance with the aforementioned states and provinces.

Does the Second Vermont Republic want to take over the government of Vermont?
Absolutely not. The people of the independent Republic of Vermont will decide how it is governed. Unlike the Free State Project in New Hampshire, our aim is not to take over the government. For that reason, the Second Vermont Republic takes no official position on such controversial issues as abortion, gay marriage, school prayer, and legalizing marijuana. These are issues for the citizens of the independent republic to decide.

Could Vermont survive economically as an independent nation-state?
Unquestionably. Of the 200 or so independent nation-states in the world, 50 of them have a smaller population than Vermont’s 620,000. Five of the ten richest countries in the world as measured by per capita income are smaller than Vermont: Liechtenstein, Iceland, Luxembourg, Bermuda, and Cayman Islands. Independence does not mean economic or political isolation. Over 600 Vermont firms export nearly 24 percent of the state’s gross product. We see no reason why this should change after independence.

Is Vermont independence politically feasible?
Yes. Ultimately whether or not Vermont achieves political independence is a question of political will. Is the will of the people of Vermont for independence strong enough to overcome the will of the U.S. Government to prevent them from achieving their goal?

In 1989 six Eastern European allies of the Soviet Union unseated their respective Communist governments and seceded from the Soviet sphere of influence. With the bloody exception of Romania, this all took place nonviolently. The Second Vermont Republic has been particularly influenced by the solidarity movement in Poland, and Czech leader Vaclav Havel’s concept of the “power of the powerless.”

What are the necessary steps?
The Vermont Legislature must be persuaded to authorize a convention of the people to vote on seceding the petition for statehood approved by the Vermont Assembly in January 1791 and ratified on March 4, 1791. To be credible, the vote should pass by at least a two-thirds majority. Articles of Secession should then be submitted to the U.S. President, Secretary of State, President of the Senate, and Speaker of the House. Diplomatic recognition should be sought from Canada, Quebec, Mexico, England, France, and the United Nations. And then the moment of truth—Vermont would start behaving like an independent nation-state.

How can one learn more about secession and the Vermont independence movement?
See John Remington Graham’s book A Constitutional History of Secession and Thomas Naylor’s The Vermont Manifesto. For more information, visit the websites of the Second Vermont Republic at www.vermontrepublic.org and Vermont Commons at www.vtcommons.org.

What if the Vermont independence movement fails?
Vermont still provides a communitarian alternative to the dehumanized mass production, mass consumption, narcissistic lifestyle that pervades most of the United States. Vermont is smaller, more rural, more democratic, less violent, less commercial, more egalitarian, and more independent than most states. It offers itself as a kinder, gentler metaphor for a nation obsessed with money, power, size, speed, greed, and fear of terrorism.