A Brief Welcome to the Long Emergency
By James Howard Kunstler

The world—and of course the United States and Vermont—faces an epochal predication: the global oil production peak and the arc of depletion that follows. We are unprepared for this crisis of industrial civilization. We are sleepwalking into the future. The peak oil production event will change everything about how we live. It will challenge all of our assumptions. It will compel us to do things differently—whether we like it or not. We need to integrate these new realities into our collective worldview, in order to start making the changes our nation will have to make if we want to carry on the project of civilization.

Nobody knows when the absolute peak year of global oil production will occur. Some believe we are already at peak and the behavior of the global markets proves it. Saudi Arabia seems to have lost the ability to function as “swing producer.” The good news is that OPEC can no longer set the price of oil. The bad news is that nobody can. When there is no production surplus in the world, that’s a pretty good sign that the world is at peak. Prince-ton Geologist Kenneth Deffeyes says that peak production will occur this year. Others, like Colin Campbell, former chief geologist for Shell Oil, put it more conservatively as between now and 2007. But by any measure of rational planning or policy-making, these differences are insignificant.

The meaning of the oil peak and its enormous implications are generally misunderstood even by those who have heard about it—and this includes the mainstream corporate media and the Americans who make plans or policy. The world does not have to run out of oil or natural gas for severe instabilities, network breakdowns, and systems failures to occur. All that is necessary is for world production capacity to reach its absolute limit—a point at which no increased production is possible and the long arc of depletion commences, with oil production then falling by a few percentages steadily every year thereafter. That’s the global oil peak: the end of absolute increased production and beginning of absolute declining production.

One huge implication of the oil peak is that industrial societies will never again enjoy the 2 to 7 percent annual economic growth that has been considered healthy for over 100 years. This amounts to the industrialized nations of the world finding themselves in a permanent depression. Long before the oil actually depletes we will endure world-shaking political disturbances and economic disruptions. We will see globalism-in-reverse. Globalism was never an “ism,” by the way. It was not a belief system. It was a manifestation of the 20-year-final-blowout of cheap oil. Like all economic distortions, it produced economic perversions. It allowed gigantic, predatory organisms like Wal-Mart to spawn and reproduce at the expense of more cellular fine-grained economic communities.

The end of globalism will be hastened by international competition over the world’s richest oil-producing regions. We are already seeing the first military adventures and three oil as the U.S. attempts to pacify the Middle East in order to assure future supplies. This is by no means a project we can feel confident about. The Iraq war has only been the overture to more desperate contests ahead. Bear in mind that the most rapidly industrializing nation in the world, China, is geographically closer to the Caspian region and the Middle East than we are. The Chinese can walk into these regions, and someday they just might. In any case, and apart from the likelihood of military mischief, as the world passes the petroleum peak the global oil markets will destabilize and the industrial nations will have enormous problems with both price and supply. The effect on currencies and international finance will, of course, be equally severe.

Some of you may be aware that the U.S. faces an imminent crisis with natural gas, perhaps more immediately threatening than the reckoning we face over oil. Over the past two decades—in response to the OPEC embargoes of the 70s and the Chernobyl and Three Mile Island emergencies of the 80s—we have so excessively shifted our electric power generation to dependence on natural gas that no amount of drilling can keep up with current demand. The situation is very ominous now.

Right here I am compelled to inform you that the prospects for alternative fuels are poor. We suffer from a kind of Jiminy Cricket syndrome in this country. We seem to believe that if you wish hard enough for something, it will come true. Right now a lot of people—including people who ought to know better—are wishing for some miracle technology to save our collective ass. The hydro- gen economy is a fantasy. It is not going to happen. We may be able to run a very few things on hydro- gen, but we are not going to replace the entire U.S. automobile fleet with hydrogen fuel-cell cars. Nor will we do it with electric cars or natural-gas cars. Wind power and solar electric will not produce significant amounts of power within the context of the way we live now. No combination of alternative fuel systems currently known will allow us to run what we are running, the way we’re running it, or even a significant fraction of it.

The future is therefore telling us very loudly that we will have to change the way we live in this country. The implications are clear: we will have to downscale and rescale virtually everything we do.

The downscaling of America is a tremendous and inescapable project. It is the master ecological project of our time. We will have to do it whether we like it or not. We are not prepared.

Downscaling America doesn’t mean we become a lesser people. It means that the scale at which we conduct the work of American daily life will have to be adjusted to fit the requirements of a post-globalist, post-cheap-oil age. We are going to have to live a lot more locally and a lot more intensively on that local level. Industrial agriculture, as represented by the Archer Daniels Midland / soda pop and Cheez Doodle model of doing things, will not survive the end of the cheap-oil economy.

The implications of this are enormous. Successful human ecologies in the near future will have to

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The Proud American Tradition of Secession

Let’s begin with the “shout heard ‘round the world.” The words of Thomas Jefferson and the first Continental Congress in 1776. The opening moments in what has become one of the most important documents about “freedom” and “democracy” in modern world history: The Declaration of Independence.

A document that is, at the core, about secession. Why peacefully secede from the United States? Why create an independent Vermont Republic (again), interested in a free and unfettered exchange of ideas, goods, services, and good will with the rest of the globe? How would we actually go about doing such a thing?

That’s why Vermont Commons is here. To explore these questions.

Here are the words of Thomas Jefferson’s “Declaration” in 1776. As citizens of the richest and most powerful empire in the world, Jefferson and the members of the Continental Congress challenged the legitimacy of the British imperial government’s tyrannical rule over the frontiers of their empire.

Remember?

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.

Of what relevance are Jefferson’s words today? Today, we Americans are citizens of the richest and most powerful empire the world has ever known. An empire that is in serious trouble, for reasons we will be exploring in Vermont Commons now and in the months to come.

And we Vermonters live on the frontier, the borderlands, the fringes of this empire. As Thomas Jefferson and the English colonists lived on the fringes of empire in 1776.

If you believe those colonists had a right to pursue independence, then you must grant today’s Vermonters that same right. And, we hope, you will lend your voice to the discussion.

—Rob Williams
Letters

Examine Healthcare Reform

Congratulations on Vermont Commons. What I’d like to see, and what might make your new vehicle relevant to a lot of people, is in-depth examination of the new healthcare reform bill and the prospect of universal healthcare in Vermont. If Vermont were to depart from U.S. health-business-as-usual and adopt a system like that of Switzerland, Sweden, the UK, or Canada (all differently owned and funded, yet all universal), it would advance the cause of autonomy and free experimentation with new policy in Vermont, and probably (if it worked) encourage other such moves in areas like pension reform (Social Security), child care, education, energy, etc. You are in an excellent position to influence the intellectual debate, and take it above the level of standard rhetoric (on all sides) and domination by mainstream media and other corporations.

Ralph Meima, Ph.D., MBA, MA  
Assistant Professor of Organizational Management  
School for International Training  
Brattleboro, Vermont

Editor’s Response:  
A healthcare issue is in the works. We encourage submissions by people knowledgeable about the question.

Secession Not Realistic

Do people really understand the consequences of seceding from the Union? I wonder. Reading the goals presented for a second Vermont Republic, I don’t see how these goals are attainable. As a Vermonter and a student studying politics and history, I don’t see the logic behind the goals presented. First, let us assume that no other states or provinces would join Vermont to create a New Atlantic Confederacy. How would Vermont survive in this world? What currency would we use? (Most likely the U.S. dollar, but it makes you wonder.) What will we do for businesses? How can we have a sustainable, independent Vermont that is able to survive in this age if we do not have something to offer as a nation to other nations? Sure we have a beautiful, pristine countryside that attracts tourists, but what contribution could we make to the rest of the world in terms of trade and economic policy that would allow us to survive?

Look at the highways in Vermont. We are pretty reliant on federal funding to keep the highways from falling apart. (If you have ever driven on I-89, you will see we are not doing such a good job.) How would we maintain the highway—which is how most tourists enter the state—with the small tax base that we have in this state? Quality of education is mentioned as well. How and where are we going to get the funding for good schools and quality teachers? If you have gone to any town meetings lately, you’ve noticed how touchy the subject of school funding is. Towns are already taxed enough. When you ask Vermonter to give more money for schools, you see many of them fight tooth and nail. How do we solve this problem without federal funding? Healthcare is everyone’s favorite issue, and I would like to see how Vermont could provide adequate healthcare to its citizens without assistance from the federal government. I doubt that there would be many, if any, healthcare providers that would stick around an independent Vermont, and even if they did, how would they be treated by a new republic that wants to provide locally controlled healthcare? Switzerland’s system of healthcare is mentioned as an example of the type of healthcare system the new Vermont Republic would like to provide. I have to wonder how much the people of Switzerland are taxed to have this healthcare system. If Vermont were to enact that, would we be able to afford the higher taxes that it would require?

I want to stress that I have not studied these matters and there may be answers to all my questions, but as of right now it sounds like the secession movement is being supported by people who are upset with the politics of the nation and feel that the only way to express their view is to secede.

I will end with one more point. I don’t think that the United States would allow Vermont to secede peacefully. I look forward to learning more about these matters.

Sam Dimercurio  
Bristol, Vermont

Editor’s Response:  
Sam is asking all the right questions. A vigorous independence movement can only progress if it is challenged each step of the way and forced to back up its facts, ideas, and assumptions. Thanks, Sam, for holding our feet to the fire.

Many of Sam’s questions—and the questions I hear from many others skeptical about the prospect of Vermont independence—have to do with economics. How could tiny, independent Vermont survive? But this line of concern rests on two misunderstandings. One, that independence means isolation. The economic model for a new Vermont Republic is not Cuba. It’s the numerous small countries in the world with thriving trade networks, healthy rural areas, and booming tourist economies, such as Switzerland, Belgium, and even Costa Rica. Smallness is no impediment to economic health—in fact, there is some evidence that it helps.

The second common misunderstanding is that Vermont is somehow on the U.S. dole. But, as Frank Bryan pointed out in last month’s Vermont Commons, we pay our own way. There are some states that get many more federal dollars than they put in (New Mexico leads the pack), and some that are taxed heavily with little return (such as New York and New Jersey), but Vermont more or less breaks even. If we were to break away from the United States today, we would have virtually the same amount of money to work with—but much more freedom in how we spend it.

As just one example, consider the national forests. The impressive U.S. Forest Service somehow manages to lose money on all its tree harvests.  
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be supported by intensively farmed agricultural hinterlands. Places that can’t do this will fail. Say goodbye to Phoenix and Las Vegas. I’m not optimistic about most of our big cities. They are going to have to contract severely. They achieved their current scale during the most exuberant years of the cheap-oil fiesta, and they will have enormous problems remaining viable afterward. Any mega-structure, whether it is a skyscraper or a land-scraper—buildings that depend on huge amounts of natural gas and electricity—may not be usable a decade or two in the future.

What goes for the scale of places will be equally true for the scale of social organization. All large-scale enterprises, including corporations and governments, will function very poorly in the post-cheap-oil world. Many of my friends and colleagues live in fear of the federal government turning into Big Brother. I’m skeptical. Once the permanent global energy crisis really gets underway, the federal government will be lucky if it can answer the phones. Same thing for Microsoft or even Star Market.

All indications are that American life will have to be reconstituted along the lines of traditional towns, villages, and cities much reduced in their current scale. These will be the most successful places once we are gripped by the profound challenge of a permanent reduced energy supply. The economy of the Long Emergency we face will alter new development drastically. Do not make assumptions based on things like the home-building industry continuing to exist as it is. We are entering a period of economic hardship and declining incomes. The increment of new development will be very small, probably the individual building lot.

The suburbs are going to tank spectacularly. We are going to see an unprecedented loss of equity value and, of course, basic usefulness. We are going to see an amazing distress sale of properties, with few buyers. We’re going to see a fight over the table scraps of the 20th century. We’ll be lucky if the immense failure of suburbia doesn’t result in an extreme politics of grievance and scapegoating. The action in the years ahead will be in renovating existing towns and villages, and connecting them with regions of productive agriculture. Where the big cities are concerned, there is simply no historical precedent for the downsizing they will require. The possibilities for social and political distress ought to be obvious, though.

The post-cheap-oil future will be much more about staying where you are than about being mobile. Unless we rebuild a U.S. passenger railroad network, a lot of people will not be going anywhere. Today we have a passenger railroad system that the Bulgarians would be ashamed of. The presence of automobiles in daily life will be greatly reduced. Don’t make too many plans to design parking structures. The post-cheap-oil world is not going to be about parking, either. But it will be about the design and assembly and reconstitution of places worth caring about and worth being in. When you have to stay where you are and live locally, you pay a lot more attention to the quality of your surroundings, especially if you are not moving through the landscape at 50 miles per hour.

Some regions of the country will do better than others. The sunbelt will suffer in exact proportion to the degree that it prospered artificially during the cheap-oil blowout of the late-20th century. I predict that the Southwest will become substantially depopulated, since they will be short of water as well as gasoline and natural gas. I’m not optimistic about the Southeast either, for different reasons. I think it will be subject to substantial levels of violence as the grievances of the formerly middle class boil over and combine with the delusions of Pentecostal Christian extremism.

All regions of the nation will be affected by the vicissitudes of this Long Emergency, but I think New England and the Upper Midwest have some—what better prospects. I regard them as less likely to fall into lawlessness, anarchy, or despotism, and more likely to salvage the bits and pieces of our best social traditions and keep them in operation at some level. There is a fair chance that the nation will disaggregate into autonomous regions before the 21st century is over, as a practical matter if not officially. Life will be very local. These challenges are immense. We will have to rebuild local networks of economic and social relations that we allowed to be systematically dismantled over the past 50 years. In the process, our communities may be able to reconstitute themselves.

The economy of the mid-21st century may center on agriculture. Not information. Not the digital manipulation of pictures, not services like selling cheeseburgers and entertaining tourists. Farming. Food production. The transition to this will be traumatic, given the destructive land-use practices of our time, and the staggering loss of knowledge. We will be lucky if we can feed ourselves. The age of the 3000-mile caesar salad will soon be over. Food production based on massive petroleum inputs, on intensive irrigation, on gigantic factory farms in just a few parts of the nation, and on cheap trucking will not continue. We will have to produce at least some of our food closer to home. We will have to do it with fewer fossil-fuel-based fertilizers and pesticides on smaller-scale farms. Farming will have to be much more labor-intensive than it is now. We will see the return of an entire vanished social class—the homegrown American farm laborer.
We are going to have to reorganize everyday commerce in this nation from the ground up. The whole system of continental-scale, big-box discount and chain-store shopping is headed for extinction, and sooner than you might think. It will go down fast and hard. Americans will be astonished when it happens.

Operations like Wal-Mart have enjoyed economies of scale that were attained because of very special and anomalous historical circumstances: a half century of relative peace between great powers, along with cheap oil—absolutely reliable supplies of it, since the OPEC disruptions of the 70s.

Wal-Mart and its imitators will not survive the oil-market disruptions to come. Not even for a little while. Wal-Mart will not survive when its merchandise supply chains to Asia are interrupted by military contests over oil or internal conflict in the nations that have been supplying us with ultra-cheap manufactured goods. Wal-Mart’s “warehouse on wheels” will not be able to operate in a post-cheap-oil economy.

It will only take mild-to-moderate disruptions in the supply and price of gas to put Wal-Mart and all operations like it out of business. And it will happen. As that occurs, America will have to make other arrangements for the distribution and sale of ordinary products. It will have to be reorganized at the regional and the local scale. It will have to be based on moving merchandise shorter distances at multiple increments and probably by multiple modes of transport. It is almost certain to result in higher costs for the things we buy, and fewer choices of things. We are not going to rebuild the cheap-oil manufacturing facilities of the 20th century.

We will have to recreate the lost infrastructures of local and regional commerce, and it will have to be multilayered. These were the people who Wal-Mart systematically put out of business over the past thirty years. The wholesalers, the jobbers, the small-retailers. They were economic participants in their communities; they made decisions that had to take the needs of their communities into account. They were employers who employed their neighbors. They were a substantial part of the middle class of every community in America and all of them together played civic roles in our communities as the caretakers of institutions—the people who sat on the library boards, and the hospital boards, and bought the balls and bats and uniforms for the little-league teams. We got rid of them in order to save nine bucks on a hair dryer. We threw away uncountable millions of dollars worth of civic amenity in order to shop at the Big Box. That was some bargain.

This will all change. The future is telling us to prepare to do business locally again. It will not be a hyper-turbo-consumer economy. That will be over with. But we will still make things, and buy and sell things.

A lot of the knowledge needed to do local retail has been lost, because in the past the ownership of local retail businesses was often done by families. The knowledge and skills for doing it was transmitted from one generation to the next. It will not be so easy to get that back. But we have to do it.

Education is another system that will probably have to change. Our centralized schools are too big and too dependent on fleets of buses. Children will have to live closer to the schools they attend. School will have to be reorganized on a neighborhood basis, at a much smaller scale, in smaller buildings that do not look like medium-security prisons.

The psychology of previous investment is a huge obstacle to the reform of education. We poured fifty years of our national wealth into gigantic sprawling centralized schools, but that investment itself does not mean these schools will be able to function in a future that works very differently. In the years ahead college, will no longer be just another “consumer product.” Fewer people will go to them. They will probably revert to their former status as elite institutions, whether we like it or not. Many of them will close altogether.

Change is coming, whether we are prepared for it or not. If we don’t begin right away to make better choices, then we will face political, social, and economic disorders that will shake this nation to its foundation. I hope you will go back to your homes and classrooms and workplaces with these ideas in mind and think about what your roles will be in this challenging future. Good luck and prepare to be good neighbors.

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That’s right: we Vermonters (and everyone else) actually pay the federal government to take our own trees out of the Green Mountain National Forest. We get no return whatsoever. Just one of the many economic benefits to a Vermont Republic would be that we would immediately stop giving handouts to the Forest Service and get complete control over our own trees.

Education and healthcare are two more issues where becoming independent wouldn’t solve our problems—but it wouldn’t leave us any worse off. And by making the focus smaller and more local, we might stand a better chance of coming up with some actual solutions.

Remember, the United States is in debt up to its eyeballs. It owes $7.8 trillion, with no hopes of paying that back. As will be explored in a future issue of Vermont Commons, the debt gets deeper every day as we desperately borrow money from China and Japan to keep the government functioning. If the United States were an individual, it would be forced to declare bankruptcy. We stay viable only so long as the other countries and investors of the world let us slide. When they call us accountable, the dollar will collapse, and the economy will implode. Vermont’s separation from the United States is not economic suicide; it is the life raft rowing away from the Titanic before the big ship pulls us to the bottom with it.

Sam’s last question is a biggie. What would the U.S. Government do if Vermont tried to secede? I have no idea. I doubt anybody does. (But see Thomas Naylor’s thoughts on that subject in this issue.) Our hopes for this journal are to explore that and many other questions that currently have no answers. Only by doing so will we be prepared for self-rule when it comes.

To that end, send us your questions. Keep firing away. What about the money we all have in Social Security? What about Federal lands and buildings? What about corporations looking for sweet tax deals in the new Republic? What about NATO, NAFTA, and GATT? We don’t even know what all the questions should be yet—but we do know that the process of discovery will be stimulating, surprising, and will teach us much about what we truly value in our lives and communities.

—Rowan Jacobsen
Nonviolent Vermont Independence
By Thomas Naylor

One of the questions I’m asked most often is, “How would the United States respond to an attempt by Vermont to secede from the Union?” Would the United States send troops to Vermont? Maybe, maybe not.

Why would anyone want to invade tiny Vermont? Only Wyoming has a smaller population. Vermont has no military bases, few defense contractors, virtually no strategic resources, no large cities, and no important government installations. Its only strategic resource is the aging Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant.

What if the Marines were to invade the Green Mountain State? Would all of the black-and-white Holsteins be destroyed or perhaps the entire sugar maple crop burned? Imagine trying to enslave freedom-loving Vermonters. Good luck!

Vermont is too small, too rural, and too independent to be invaded by anyone. It is a threat to no one. Furthermore, Vermonters, not unlike the Swiss, tend to stick to their own knitting rather than poking their noses into everyone else’s business. Vermont has always been that way, and it probably always will be.

Vermont can learn a lot from Eastern Europe’s experience with Václav Havel’s idea of the “power of the powerless.” Within a matter of a few weeks in 1989, the iron-fisted communist regimes in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland were replaced by more democratic governments, with little or no violence involved in the transition. Only Romania was a bloody exception to this rule.

The 1989 election of Solidarity leader Lech Walesa was the climax of a bitter, eight-year struggle to bring down the repressive Polish communist government. It involved repeated confrontation and engagement and eventually complex negotiations. During martial law, several hundred Solidarity leaders were imprisoned for relatively short periods of time, but amazingly only a handful of Poles were actually killed. Václav Havel’s so-called velvet revolution also brought down communism in Czechoslovakia nonviolently.

Nonviolence is not a passive approach to conflict resolution but rather a proactive approach that goes right to the crux of power relationships. It can undermine power and authority by withdrawing the approval, support, and cooperation of those who have been dealt an injustice. It demands strength and courage and not idle pacifism. Nonviolence derives its strength from the energy buildup and very real power of powerlessness.

Many American Sovietologists were surprised that the Soviet Union did not intervene militarily in Poland in 1980 as it had done in Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968. But Poland had a lot of influential friends, not the least of which were the United States and Western Europe. The Soviets could have snuffed out Solidarity, but that would not have played well in London, Paris, or Washington.

Vermont also has a lot of good friends in the United States, Canada, Europe, and the rest of the world. Part of Vermont’s strength lies in the absurdity of its confronting the most powerful nation in the world. Vermont will attract sympathy from within the United States and abroad simply by virtue of its role as an underdog. It’s David and Goliath relived!

If Vermont were to submit formal articles of secession to the Secretary of State, the burden would be on the White House to decide how to respond. Congress might try to impose a trade embargo on Vermont, but it’s unlikely that either Quebec or Canada would abide by it. It is not a foregone conclusion that the United States government would intervene militarily in Vermont. Nor is it obvious that Vermont would require its own separate standing army or defense capability.

Costa Rica, for example, has survived since 1948 without any military force whatsoever. Conquering Vermont would be a lot like invading Liechtenstein or one of the more rural Swiss cantons.

Five of the ten richest countries in the world as measured by per capita income actually have fewer people than Vermont’s 620,000. They include Bermuda, the Channel Islands, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Luxembourg. Of these five countries only Luxembourg has a standing army of its own. And its army has only 900 active troops. Liechtenstein has been neutral since 1866 and has no standing army whatsoever. NATO provides for the military defense of Bermuda and Iceland, and the Channel Islands are under British military protection.

If Vermont felt a need for some form of military support to protect itself from attack by the United States, it could always appeal to Canada, NATO, or the United Nations for protection. However, it is unclear why anyone would want to attack a state of so little strategic importance. States like California, New York, and Texas—which have big military bases, major defense plants, and big cities—are much more likely targets for terrorists and others bent on inflicting harm.

In 1775 Ethan Allen took Fort Ticonderoga without firing a single shot. If Vermont can succeed in undermining the moral authority of the United States and convincing the rest of the world that the United States government is corrupt to the core, then it too may be able to escape from the Union without ever firing a shot.

May God bless the disunited States of America.
How our plucky little state’s identity evolved from an 18th-century terra incognita is a process that reflects two basic facts: much has changed in 250 years that bodes for further change; and human decisions more than the land are responsible for regional identity. The concept of Vermont as a separate political entity fits the definition of a region as a bounded space with a perceived character of its own. This distinctiveness is the result of a set of historical contingencies acting on an undefined space. To make sense of what has occurred, we can identify four chronological periods in Vermont’s past.

**Stage One: Bounding and Naming the Territory (1750–1800)**

Virtually nothing about Vermont’s regional identity predates 18th-century settlement. The aboriginal presence is scantly recorded in early documents or in names on the land. The Western Abenaki had a distribution at white contact much wider than Vermont. Samuel de Champlain arrived in 1609 as the earliest European and found the eastern side of the lake he later named after himself largely devoid of people, perhaps depopulated by war or disease. French forts and villages had short periods of use and most of the big estates laid out on paper in the 18th century for the Champlain Valley were never actually settled.

Conflict between France and England did much to discourage immigration and land clearing for more than a century. Little by little colonists from Connecticut and Massachusetts moved into that demographic vacuum. The first settlers pushed into the upper Connecticut River Valley as early as the 1740s. By the 1760s, New Hampshire’s Royal Governor Wentworth had chartered towns and granted to applicants land that covered almost half of the territory that is now Vermont west of the Connecticut River. Grantees then sold parcels to settlers. After 1763 and the end of the French and Indian Wars, land-hungry settlers moved into the Champlain Valley. But conflict arose over which agent was authorized to sell those lands, for the Colony of New York claimed ownership of the same territory as the Province of New Hampshire. Caught between two contending authorities, settlers were determined to protect their titles to property. Freeholders, some of whom were speculators, formed a militia led by Ethan Allen to protect their interests. Their participation in the American Revolution provided a convenient screen for the much more pressing matter of not being absorbed into the New York quasi-feudal land system. A fact that deserves emphasis, because it explains the strength of the town as a political unit, is that Vermont basically started as a federation of localities that saw security in unity.

When the growing dispute between New Hampshire and New York threatened to nullify land titles, these anxious landholders cast their lot with neither and instead chose their own path as a separate polity. When its petition of 1777 to join the United States was turned down, Vermont defiantly declared itself to be independent of everybody: New York, New Hampshire, and Great Britain. For the next 14 years, this hardscrabble entity functioned as a quasi-republic with its own constitution and coinage. Only two other states, California and Texas, have had that same sovereign history. In 1791, soon after its land titles were legally accepted by both New Hampshire and New York, Vermont without hesitation joined the Union.

Vermont’s push for autonomy was favored by the use of physical features to bound its territory east and west. Two north-to-south water bodies,
the Connecticut River on the east and Lake Champlain on the west, simplified longitudinal circumscription. Latitudinal delineation had no natural features to follow, but the southern boundary had already been defined in 1740 when a royal commission established the line between the Massachusetts Bay Colony and New Hampshire. The 45th north latitude line was used as the northern border when the southern boundary of Lower Canada was defined in 1763, although conflict about it persisted until 1842. Maps of a bounded Vermont date from 1789. By that time the territory had been largely settled except in the far northeast and on uplands above 1500 feet elevation.

A distinctive regional name was adopted quite deliberately. The two early territorial designations of “New Hampshire Grants” (later shortened to “The Grants”) and “New Connecticut” were viewed as unsuitable in framing a separate geographic identity. “Vermont” was proposed as the new name as early as 1763 in a supposed Gallic allusion to the Green Mountains that quietly mirrored the anti-British sentiment of the period. The awkward “d” in that manufactured word was soon discarded, and the more felicitous present spelling was accepted in 1777. The first usage of the name Vermont on a map dates from 1780, although not until 1794 did such a map appear that corresponded to present borders.

This period also provided symbols that have sustained subsequent generations in their search for regional identity. The classic reading of the state’s past still calls upon the Green Mountain Boys and their leader Ethan Allen to define the regional essence of freemen with the courage to act. Another symbol is the catamount, a subspecies of mountain lion found in the state until 1881, which roamed the anti-British sentiment of the period. The far northeast and on uplands above 1500 feet elevation.

**Stage One:** Development of Regional Consciousness (1800–1880)

Vermont emerged as a functioning region in the 19th century in several ways. A rapid settlement after 1790 increased the population from 85,000 to 281,000 by 1830. That influx, which domesticated 80 percent of the landscape, bolstered the collective confidence needed at a critical moment for an emerging political unit. However, soon thereafter, emigration over most of the following century led to population decline and a shrinking tax base in most towns. State government was a major factor in effectively dealing with these sharp changes. In 1805 Montpelier was designated to be the capital as a compromise site between the two broad valleys at opposite sides of the state. In that setting, laws were drafted to collect taxes, charter municipalities, found public institutions, and provide some state services. At the town level of government there was a desire for minimal state authority.

The emergence of a Vermont identity had much to do with a strong egalitarian sentiment. Vermont’s first constitution (1777) prohibited slavery and granted universal male suffrage. It was the earliest document in North America to codify these basic aspects of equality. The Civil War tested those beliefs in moral virtue and a larger per capita contingent of Vermonters served in that conflict than did from any other state. The end of slavery reinforced equality as a core value of Vermont identity.

Vermont also acquired regional consciousness from the economic specializations that emerged after 1830 to replace generalized farming. Merino stock imported from Portugal gave rise to a sheep-rearing boom. Then dairying started to gain ascendancy in the 1850s with the fall in wool prices and the coming of the railroad. In 1869 the Vermont Dairymen’s Association, concerned about getting products to market, put pressure on the state to construct adequate roads. By the 1870s much cheese and butter and, later, fluid milk was sent to Boston and New York. Hay and corn to feed cows drove rural land use and reinforced a mosaic landscape that has dominated the Vermont image up to the present. Maple products from the woodlots on dairy farms provided an important supplementary income. After the state came up with the idea of guaranteeing product purity, Vermont maple syrup gained wide recognition. Stone quarrying enhanced the region’s identity of Vermont marble and granite were used on many monumental buildings of American Eastern cities.

**Stage Two:** Development of Regional Consciousness (1880–1965)

The emergence of a coherent Vermont image outside the state helped cement its identity as a region. With the rise of travel for its own sake, flatlanders increasingly appreciated Vermont’s landscapes and inhabitants. Vermont became defined as a special place. Though the northeastern United States progressively urbanized, Vermont remained rural. Rurality was once proof of backwardness, but during the 20th century, it turned into an advantage. Eastern city dwellers who came as tourists at first by rail and then by car found pastoral landscapes attractive, perhaps because they were not involved in working the hill farms. When those farms were abandoned, the state as early as 1890 came up with the then-startling idea of advertising these properties as second homes to urbanites.

Chief among any list of well-known Vermonters was U.S. President Calvin Coolidge (1872–1933), a crusty, laconic type born in Plymouth, Vermont, who catapulted into the national spotlight in 1923 by the fluke of assassination. Media commentary on Coolidge enthroned Vermont in American folklore as the domain of the pure Yankee. At a time when heavy immigration had diversified the American urban population, Vermont as a Yankee preserve was a notion that had unspoken significance for nativist sentiment.

Self-sufficiency was part of this folk ethnocentrism, and federal challenges helped to define it further. When in 1927 a devastating flood left the state in serious disarray, the governor initially rejected federal rehabilitation assistance. Mindful of flood threats, the U.S. Government later sought to devise a river-basin management plan for the upper Connecticut River, modeled on the Tennessee Valley Authority. Vermont vetoed the plan and it was not built. The state later constructed flood control dams on its own and under other auspices. In 1936 Vermont rejected another federal proposal, that one for a paved scenic road along the crest of the Green Mountains, thus preserving the heights for those on foot instead of in cars. Decisions have sometimes extended well beyond regional authority: in September 1941 the Vermont legislature voted to declare war on Germany, two months before the federal government in Washington did so.

**Stage Three:** Consolidation of Regional Identity (1880–1965)

In the 1960s Vermont became increasingly attractive as a place to visit and to live. The interstate highway system completed in that decade gave easy and rapid access to Vermont. Tourism greatly expanded to become the backbone of the economy. Ski resorts underwent heavy capitalization from outside the state. Second-home development surged in this same period. Most tourists and seasonal residents come from the urbanized eastern seaboard. Metropolitan Boston and New York have contributed the most to this flow, but even Washington is within a day’s travel on the interstate or by air.

Permanent migration to Vermont since 1965 dramatically reversed the demographic decline of the preceding half century. Between 1960 and 2000 the state’s population increased by almost 60 percent. Migration to the state continues even while industrial employment declines, as telecommuting and the growth of home-based businesses free people to live where they want. Newcomers seek a rural or small-town way of life that includes a sense of civic community, clean air, and personal safety. The town meeting concept of participatory democracy, absence of serious atmospheric pollution, and the nation’s lowest homicide rate gives Vermont an unforeseen appeal. Vermont’s dominant visual image—quiet villages surrounded by neat farms—became catnip to the metropolitan imagination. The antique is also part of this image. Nineteenth-century buildings, abundant in this state but replaced elsewhere by more dynamic growth, made Vermont a focus for the historic preservation movement.

Vermont gives attention to environmental matters to an extent seldom seen elsewhere in the United States. A commonality of interest among small farmer populists, the village gentry with Yankee roots, and, more recently, the intellectual left, converge on issues of land, water, and air. Egalitarian continuity from a pioneer past and the absence of powerful special interests were instrumental in building that consensus. Billboards were removed in 1968, bottle return was mandated in 1972, and the country’s most far-reaching development control statutes (Act 250 in 1970, followed in 1988 by the stricter Act 200) were enacted. These laws allow citizens to assess and participate in decisions concerning the impact of growth unleashed by large developments. Plans for suburban shopping malls and major condominium complexes, if not always rejected, have frequently undergone revision before being built.

Newcomers’ attitudes and state activism have made Vermont one of the country’s more progressive states. That reputation was enhanced in 2000 by adoption of the first civil union law for same-sex couples in the United States.
earlier generations saw state government as incompetent, tyrannical, and largely unnecessary, by the 1980s many viewed government as a potential force for good. State intervention has resulted in high taxation and a bureaucratic apparatus quite beyond that of its twice-as-populous neighbor, New Hampshire, where fierce opposition to all forms of statewide taxation has become the chief political dogma. Vermont’s collective identity is now sometimes articulated by how it contrasts with that of New Hampshire.

The use of a regional identity for economic advantage is a recent development. Vermont’s image in the popular consciousness suggests the fresh and natural. To capitalize on that image, commercial enterprises increasingly give themselves names dominated by “Vermont” and “Green Mountain.” A closely related phenomenon is the use of a “seal of quality” on products made in the state. “Vermont” has proved to have a demonstrated magic in helping to sell cheese, ice cream, syrup, spring water, turkeys, salad dressings, and jams all over the world.

Historical Contingency and Vermont Identity

The accretion of events and decisions over these four periods has solidified Vermont’s identity. Originally, the Green Mountains separated the area of what is today Vermont into eastern and western halves, each with its own social character: the Connecticut Valley inhabited by conservative gentry and the Champlain Valley by freethinking land seekers. However, the people on both sides shared the determination to fight for land they believed was theirs. If those settlers had not made common cause in fighting for their perceived rights, New Hampshire and New York probably would have divided the area along the crest of the Green Mountains. That mobilization was the first incident to transform previously undefined space into a region with distinct identity. Once statehood was achieved, the combined effects of a constitutional, legal statutes, taxation, and adjudication imposed an organization on the territory.

Since the 1960s, however, the elements of the postindustrial age have been at least as important as anything done by the state itself in furthering Vermont’s identity. Indeed, the present definition of Vermont as a region owes much to out-of-state sentiments that romanticize its qualities and landscapes. Vermont is seen as offering an antidote to the ills of urban life. A general American aversion to living in cities makes many people idealize the rural, even though uncertain livelihoods of unremitting hard toil on hill farms are nothing that a city dweller would choose.

Threats to the Vermont countryside prompted the National Trust for Historic Preservation to designate in 1993 and again in 2004 the entire state of Vermont as being among the “nation’s eleven most endangered historic places.” Ironically, while the interstate highways facilitated the sprawl that threatens the state’s image, without those very roads Vermont would not have been accessible enough to have developed its strong identity in the national consciousness.

Newcomers to Vermont are those most inclined to proclaim the state’s charms and identity. Many of these people understand who they are by defining where they are. Regional self-identification becomes a substitute for ethnic, religious, or class membership. Sometimes a syllogistic thinking takes hold: Vermont is concerned with the environment; since I live in Vermont, that demonstrates my concern for the environment. Another concern caused by Vermont’s strong identity is the issue of material gain from that identity. Private interests, in complicity with state governmental agencies, promote Vermont in order to sell products, bring in more tourists, and lure suitable firms. Too much reality interfering with that image then becomes an economic threat, not just an intrusion.

The directional gaze of Vermont deserves its own comment. Contact with Québec to the north is much less than might be expected by simple distance. The international border and its hassles, different currency, and cultural differences slow the flow of people, goods, and ideas. To the west, Lake Champlain makes a pretty good psychological barrier to movement. To the east, contacts are greater, particularly for shopping, but it is the south that dominates Vermont’s outward gaze, and has the most influence on the state. That has been the case for 250 years. In the 18th century, proximity to the overpopulated “hearth” in southern New England filled this demographic vacuum with anxious land seekers. In the late-19th century dairying emerged as the economic base when Boston and New York provided major markets within easy reach. Now Vermont, linked intrinsically to the north-south superhighways, is a recreational appendage of Megalopolis.

Conclusion

Economy, land use, and population by themselves are only part of the regional identity of Vermont. Myth and symbol are part of it too. Most intriguing is to consider how the historical-geographical processes at work in Vermont over two-and-a-half centuries hold clues to the future. What advances in place identity would it take to move into the Second Republic millennium? What new or revamped institutions would be needed and what symbols could be invented to achieve that objective? The Vermont project is still an act of becoming.
News and Upcoming Events

Vermont Commons Bumper Sticker Contest!

Every great organization has a great bumper sticker. Starting right now, we are looking for your bumper sticker ideas. Something short, pithy, and provocative related to Vermont Commons’ mission. Something like: What Would Ethan Do? (And if you need us to explain this one to you, you must be a flatlander.)

We’ll give away a FREE subscription to the five best ideas. (And, of course, some FREE bumper stickers, once they get made.) Submit your ideas on our blog at www.vtcommons.org, or e-mail them to editor@vtcommons.org. Just to get your reactionary juices flowing, here are our favorite suggestions so far:

Take Vermont Out!
Green Mountain Nation
VT Embassy Now Hiring
The Once and Future Republic
Most Likely To Secede

Legendary UVM Professors Debate Secession

In a lively mid-week debate attended by 60 people at UVM’s Royall Tyler Hall on May 4, Frank Bryan and prize-winning debate student Julia Benjamin debated the question of Vermont secession with forensics professor Alfred “Tuna” Snider and student Ethan Nelson. “I envision secession as Vermont throwing out the rest of the country. The nation has gone astray,” explained Bryan in his opening remarks. “I see Vermont secession as us dis-associating with the U.S. I love America for what it’s been but I fear for what America is becoming. The U.S. needs a good swift kick in the butt.” Bryan went on to cite global imperialism abroad, the curtailing of civil liberties at home, and the troublesome “giantism” that marks U.S. affairs in an age of 21st-century globalization.

In critiquing the “whimsical” idea of secession, Snider and Nelson offered a three-part alternative solution, calling for the public financing of elections, the strengthening of the 10th Amendment with a new Amendment designed to strengthen states’ rights, and the abolition of the “undemocratic” Electoral College. “The idea of secession suffers from serious implementation problems,” noted Snider. “It would rip families and communities apart, cause major corporations to flee the states with jobs in tow, and may provoke the U.S. Government to invade the state.” The one-hour debate proved spirited, with dashes of humor and moments of intensity, and was accompanied by a lively question-and-answer session.

The entire debate will be broadcast on PEG community cable access TV stations throughout Vermont in the coming weeks.

Second Vermont Republic to Meet June 11

There will be a meeting of the Second Vermont Republic June 11 at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier at 130 Main Street. The public is welcome. At 1 p.m. there will be a one-hour presentation on the Hawaiian independence movement by Jon 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. For further information, call 802-425-4133.

Vermont Independence Film Premiere in Mad River Valley

Vermont Commons is holding its second statewide public screening of Independence Trilogy: U.S. Empire, Green Mountain Voices, and A Second Vermont Republic, a 30-minute film exploring Vermont secession, on Friday, June 3 at 8:00 p.m. at Fayston’s Knoll Farm. The screening will be followed by a public conversation, and, if weather permits, a bonfire and music on the hill. For directions and more information, or to arrange a showing of the Independence Trilogy in your town, please contact Rob Williams at 802-496-5199 or webeditor@vtcommons.org.

First Diplomatic Recognition for SVR

The Second Vermont Republic received its first international diplomatic recognition when SVR founder Thomas Naylor and James Hogue (aka “Ethan Allen”) were formally invited to participate in the 15th National Congress of the Parti Québécois in Quebec City on June 3–5. Look for a report on that meeting in our next issue.

New UVM Secession Group

Students for Vermont Secession, a new organization advocating for Vermont independence, has formed at UVM. To join, or to learn more, contact Jeremy Hammond at vermontsecession@cool list.com or 802-343-3864.

Rumors of its demise were greatly exaggerated: Despite a funeral at the Statehouse in Montpelier for the first Vermont Republic (above), The Second Vermont Republic lives on, and Ethan Allen (below) is on his way to Quebec once again.
We gather here to explore the possibilities of a new politics that might provide a realistic and enactable alternative to the familiar sorry political scene around us. We are convinced that the American empire, now imposing its military might on 153 countries around the world, is as fragile as empires historically tend to be, and that it might well implode upon itself in the near future. Before that happens, no matter what shape the United States may take, we believe there is at this moment an opportunity to push through new political ideas and projects that will offer true popular participation and genuine democracy. The time to prepare for that is now.

In our deliberations we considered many kinds of strategies for a new politics and eventually decided upon the inauguration of a campaign to monitor, study, promote, and develop agencies of separatism. By separatism we mean all the forms by which small political bodies, dedicated to the precept of human scale, distance themselves from larger ones, as in decentralization, dissolution, disunion, division, devolution, or secession, creating small and independent bodies that rule themselves. Of course we favor such polities that operate with participatory democracy and egalitarian justice, which are attainable only at a small scale, but the primary principle is that these states should enact their separation and self-government as they see fit.

It is important to realize that the separatist/ independence movement is the most important and widespread political force in the world today and has been for the last half-century, during which time the United Nations, for example, has grown from 51 nations in 1945 to 193 nations in 2004. The breakups of the Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia are recent manifestations of this fundamental trend, and there are separatist movements in more than two dozen countries at this time, including such well-known ones as in Catalonia, Scotland, Lapland, Sardinia, Sicily, Sudan, Congo, Kashmir, Chechnya, Kurdistan, Quebec, British Columbia, Mexico, and the Indian nations of North America.

There is no reason that we cannot begin to examine the processes of secession in the United States. There are already at least 28 separatist organizations in this country—the most active in Alaska, Texas, Hawaii, Vermont, Puerto Rico, and the South —and there seems to be a growing sentiment that, because the national government has shown itself to be clumsy, unresponsive, and unaccountable in so many ways, power should be concentrated at lower levels. Whether these levels should be the states or coherent regions within the states or something smaller still is a matter best left to the people active in devolution, but the principle of secession must be established as valid and legitimate.

To this end, therefore, we are pledged to create a movement that will place secession on the national agenda, encourage nonviolent secessionist organizations throughout the country, develop communication among existing and future secessionist groups, and create a body of scholarship to examine and promote the ideas and principles of secessionism.

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The Middlebury Declaration

The following declaration—a team effort originally conceived for a 2004 secession conference in Middlebury, Vermont—sets the Vermont independence movement in a national and international context and suggests the agenda for a think tank that we expect to get off the ground soon, to be called, in honor of our initial meeting—what else?—the Middlebury Institute.
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