

A Constitutional Congress for the Managed Populations of the Imperial Core

Kevin Carson

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Bill Kauffman has an article at the paleocon American Conservative magazine on the Vermont independence movement.

Grennon points out that three members of the Second Vermont Republic are Georgists, one is a founding member of the E.F. Schumacher Society, and the founder of the SVR is a distributist. Now, you might think that such ideas span the whole political spectrum from A to B. But the values they have in common are probably shared, to some extent, by a majority of Americans currently divided between the two major parties. And it's an aspect of popular political culture that's almost entirely ignored by the respective party establishments. Instead, we get the fake anti-government populism of Karl Rove and talk radio, when Main Street is becoming a wholly-owned subsidiary of government-subsidized Wal-Mart. And we get the fake anti-corporate populism of Hillary Clinton, when it seems every cabinet of the "party of the people" has an endowed chair for the Goldman-Sachs Secretary of the Treasury. So any third political force that can articulate these ignored popular sentiments could cause a political earthquake.

As I've written in the past, there's a nice dovetailing of geoist ideas on taxation with large parts of the free market libertarian and green movements, that potentially could provide the basis for a massive decentralist coalition on tax policy. And it has a lot of affinity with the paleos' traditional Main Street conservatism, for which Kauffman has been such an effective advocate. Such a decentralist, anti-big government/anti-big business coalition could bridge the gap between the grass roots of both major parties, create a third force in American politics, and break the power of the old bilateral axis of New Rightists/neocons and corporate liberals/New Democrats. Right now, the popular base of the GOP is made up of culture warriors and anti-government populists who don't see the central role of corporate capitalism in the atomization of society. And the mass base of the Democrats is made up of people who rightly fear the concentration of corporate power, but fail to recognize big government as the culprit.

The circulation of green-libertarian fusionist ideas in the paleo press is very promising indeed. Here's an excerpt from the article:

Free Vermont: Green Mountain boys ponder secession

By Bill Kauffman

Organizers billed the Vermont Independence Convention of Oct. 28 as “the first statewide convention on secession in the United States since North Carolina voted to secede from the Union on May 20, 1861.” North Carolina, the final state to join the Confederacy, overcame its unionist scruples with some reluctance; by contrast, the 250 or so Vermonters gathered in Montpelier, that coziest of state capitals, gloried in the prospect of disunion.

Montpelier is the only McDonald’s-less state capital in the land, and from its late October splendor issued a Jeffersonian firebell in the night, ringing a warning to the national capital: the United States deserve a break(up) today.

Only in Vermont, with its town-meeting tradition and tolerance of radical dissent, would the golden-domed State Capitol be given over to a convention exploring the whys and wherefores of splitting from the United States. And all for a rental fee of \$35! (It would have been free if the disunionists had knocked off by 4 p.m.)

* * *

Thomas Naylor, a Mississippi native and longtime professor of economics at Duke, who in best contrarian fashion flew north in retirement to the Green Mountain State, is the founder, theoretician, and chief sticker-of-stamps-on-envelopes for the Second Vermont Republic (SVR), which declares itself “a peaceful, democratic, grassroots, libertarian populist movement committed to the return of Vermont to its status as an independent republic as it once was between 1777 and 1791.”

The Second Vermont Republic has a clear, if not simple, mission: “Our primary objective is to extricate Vermont peacefully from the United States as soon as possible.” The SVR people are not doing this to “make a point” or to stretch the boundaries of debate. They really want out.

Although SVR members range from hippie greens to gun owners—and among the virtues of Vermont is that the twain do sometimes meet—Naylor describes his group’s ideological coloration as “leftish libertarian with an anarchist streak.”

The SVR lauds the principles and practices of direct democracy, local control of education and health care, small-scale farming, neighborhood enterprise, and the devolution of political power. The movement is anti-globalist and sees beauty in the small. It detests Wal-Mart, the Interstate Highway System, and a foreign policy that is “immoral, illegal, and unconstitutional.” It draws inspiration from, among others, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who in bidding farewell to his neighbors in Cavendish, Vermont, where he had lived in exile for 17 years, praised “the sensible and sure process of grassroots democracy, in which the local population solves most of its problems on its own, not waiting for the decisions of higher authorities.”

Naylor likes to say that Wal-Mart, which is “too big, too powerful, too intrusive, too mean-spirited, too materialistic, too dehumanizing, too undemocratic, too environmentally insensitive, and too unresponsive to the social, cultural, and economic needs of individual citizens and small communities,” is the American metaphor in these post-republic days. Perhaps it is. So why not a new metaphor, suggests Nay-

lor: that of Vermont, which is “smaller, more rural, more democratic, less violent, less commercial, more egalitarian, and more independent” than its sister states?

When Naylor laid out the case for independence in *The Vermont Manifesto* (2003), the political air was heavy, sodden, statist. “Even in the best of times secession is a very tough sell in the USA,” lamented Naylor in 2002. “Since Sept. 11, it has proven to be an impossible sell.” But George, Scooter, and Wolfie, for whom Vermont is just another inconsequential state full of potential bodybag fillers, came to the rescue, putting a rebarbative face on the Empire and opening the door to radical possibilities.

In stepped the Second Vermont Republic, with a blend of whimsicality and seriousness, and its “eye-catching street theater has proven irresistible to the media, as has its exponential growth in the aftermath of the 2004 elections,” according to Cathy Resmer of the Burlington weekly *Seven Days*.

With polemical wit provided by Vermont’s Bread and Puppet Theater, the SVR has staged mock funeral processions, parades, and Fourth of July floats in which children declared their independence from bedtime, “annoying siblings,” and “my floaties.” The SVR has even achieved a symbolic political success, persuading the legislature to declare Jan. 16 as Vermont Independence Day in commemoration of the establishment of the First Vermont Republic in 1777.

The group’s seriousness of purpose is evident in its literate monthly, *Vermont Commons*, which includes contributions from the likes of Wendell Berry, Bill McKibben, and Kirkpatrick Sale on such topics as family and organic farming, community-supported agriculture, land trusts, and local currencies—constituting in sum, a humane and practicable alternative to the Empire of Wal-Mart and Warfare. The tincture is green, but conservative, too, and although Naylor refuses to kiss up to his state’s hack politicians—he calls Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy “a world-class prostitute”—the Republican lieutenant governor has praised the SVR for “their energy and their passion.”

Secessionist whispers have soughed through Vermont for years. In 1990, Frank Bryan, the University of Vermont political scientist and populist author of *Real Democracy*, the definitive work on town meeting (see “Democracy in Vermont,” TAC, Sept. 13, 2004), stumped the state debating secession, in the affirmative, with Vermont Chief Justice John Dooley. Following each of the seven debates, citizens voted to secede.

The presidency of George W. Bush has made the fanciful seem a little less fantastic. The nascent SVR-inspired Middlebury Institute, directed by Kirkpatrick Sale, author of the classic *Human Scale*, seeks to “put secession on the national agenda.” Audacious, perhaps, but hardly a forlorn hope, for as Naylor asks, “Do you want to go down with the Titanic? No empire has survived the test of time.”

At the founding convention of the I.W.W. a century ago, Big Bill Haywood called his fellow workers together using a length of 2x4 as a gavel, and announced the “Continental Congress of the working class.” The convention in Montpelier had something of the same flavor:

It is no small portion of Vermont's charm that the secessionists were given use of the state house in Montpelier, which lent a certain sobriety to what might otherwise have been a rambunctiously motley conference...

The Rev. Ben T. Matchstick, a radical puppeteer, called the assembly to irreverent order with a benediction invoking "the flounder, the sunfish, and the holy mackerel." Men in business suits, white-maned Vermont earth mothers, and ponytailed college kids wearing winter skullcaps indoors packed Representatives Hall, sitting at the desks elsetimes occupied by state representatives and filling the room with a sweet fragrance of winsome radicalism and localist patriotism.

Under a portrait of George Washington, Naylor, the founding father of this republic in gestation, charged that the U.S. government has "no moral authority... it has no soul," and he denied the salvific properties of the Democratic Party: "It doesn't matter if Hillary Clinton or Condoleezza Rice is the next president—the results will be equally grim."

The article concludes:

I heard much talk of the need for libertarian conservatives and anti-globalist leftists to work together. There is a sense that the old categories, the old straitjackets, must be shed.

Amen.

I recommend some intensive browsing in the SVR "Writings" page, by the way. Among other things, there's an article by *The Voluntaryist*'s Carl Watner, Kirk Sale's "Collapse of the American Empire," and founder Thomas Naylor's "The Swiss Model of Sustainability" and "The Scourge of Bigness."

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