

# Introduction

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*Vermont Commons: Voices of Independence* was launched in April 2005. It began as a 12-page “journal” published bimonthly on newsprint, eventually expanding to 40 pages. *Vermont Commons* was distributed free on literature racks and display cases throughout the state, reaching a circulation of 12,000 copies at its peak in 2011. Its website has attracted 100,000 visitors per year.

This publication arose in the context of American politics under the administration of George W. Bush. In those post-9/11 years, the “war on terror,” the erosion of constitutional rights, and policies favoring the oil industry and other corporate elites posed an alarming acceleration of the nation’s already unfolding evolution toward flagrant imperialism. The U.S. government seemed deliberately oblivious to environmental and economic issues that many of us felt were increasingly urgent, from climate change to widening inequality, while the U.S. military presence around the globe continued to escalate.

In response, activists in Vermont began meeting in 2002 to discuss alternatives. These were not simply progressives offering partisan reactions to Bush policies but included old-fashioned (not “neo-”) conservatives alarmed by the spike in government powers. Together they began to ask tough questions about the deeper forces that fueled the rise of a U.S. empire and the consequences that would likely ensue. They considered some radical responses, including the idea of separating Vermont from national politics altogether, a proposal championed by a retired Duke University economist named Thomas Naylor.

Naylor is recognized as the father of the Vermont secession movement. As early as 1990, he was writing about “downsizing” the United States because, he believed, both government and corporate business had become too complex, centralized, and powerful. He laid out his argument in the 1997 book *Downsizing the U.S.A.* (coauthored with William H. Willimon). Naylor, who moved to Vermont in 1993, thought that this small, community-oriented state could lead the way toward the dissolution of the empire, but it was not until the aftermath of 9/11 that he found an audience. In March 2003, just before Bush’s invasion of Iraq, Naylor spoke to students at Johnson State College, telling them that the only way to prevent such wars was “to break up the United States into smaller regions, and the process should begin with Vermont declaring its independence.” He recalls that the students were “stunned, but they got it. Their positive response literally provided the energy to launch the Second Vermont Republic,” an organized effort to advocate for secession. He and other activists interested in secession began meeting ten days after the start of the bombing of Baghdad. In October, Naylor published *The Vermont Manifesto* and held a meeting, in collaboration with Bread & Puppet Theater, that drew fifty people.

In November 2004, Naylor joined with Kirkpatrick Sale, a well-known author on decentralist movements, to organize a gathering in Middlebury. The group issued the “Middlebury Declaration,” a succinct manifesto for the movement (see Appendix, p. 241). Also at the meeting, Ian Baldwin, cofounder of Chelsea Green Publishing, met media activist Rob Williams, and they began discussing a publication that would explore issues of empire and independence. Baldwin explains the process that led to his involvement:

After 9/11, the overnight enactment of the massive, unread Fascistic Patriot Act, the federal proclamation of “war without end in our lifetimes,” the invasion of Afghanistan, and the year-long blatantly deceitful campaign to conduct a massive “Shock-and-Awe” invasion of Iraq, I found

myself wholly alienated from my own country. By the end of 2002 I was considering the ex-pat option when a friend invited me to my first meeting with the secessionists led by Thomas Naylor. That meeting in March 2003, the second one held by Naylor to explore the secession option, proved decisive for my political development and my willingness to question every lie propounded by the federal government and big business through their mass media mouthpieces.

Williams's journey was similar:

After the debacle of the 2000 and 2004 presidential "elections" (and I use the term loosely), and the imperial madness surrounding the post-9/11 tragedy—the USA PATRIOT Act's passage and the acceleration of imperial wars in the greater Middle East, Africa, and Afghanistan-Pakistan—I came to the conclusion that the United States was no longer a functioning republic but an out-of-control Empire neither accountable to its own citizens, nor capable of being reformed or "fixed."

In December 2004, Baldwin and Williams met with other activists, including Gary Flomenhoft, Rick Foley, Tim Matson, and Jacki Brook, and the group launched the first issue of *Vermont Commons* only four months later. The publication would be philosophically aligned with the Second Vermont Republic, but it was always an independent effort.

Throughout this book, when I as editor refer to "we," I mean the group of editorial board members, supporters, and frequent contributors who have been affiliated with the publication at some time during these eight years. I myself did not join the group until late in 2007, when my colleague in educational activism, Susan Ohanian, introduced me to Thomas Naylor, who in turn invited me to meet Baldwin and Williams. I have been a Jeffersonian decentralist for as long as I can remember, and I was not only discouraged by the excesses of the Bush administration but, in my career in alternative education, I had become disheartened by the successful bipartisan efforts to centralize and standardize educational policies in the United States. Over the years I had supported Libertarian, Green, and Vermont Progressive party campaigns, looking for the right combination of grassroots democracy, social conscience, and ecological awareness. This small group of Vermont activists, with their thoughtful, holistic, incisive critique of the politics of empire, came very close to what I had been seeking. I thought the notion of secession was, at least, a provocative way to awaken Americans from our complacency—a potent conversation starter, although I've never been convinced that it should be the centerpiece of our political strategy.

Indeed, *Vermont Commons* has not simply advocated for secession; it has provided a forum for exploring the roots of American imperialism and a range of possible social, cultural, and economic antidotes to it. We view the machinations of the U.S. government as part and parcel of a contemporary trend toward endless growth, consolidation, centralization, and domination by powerful institutions, including not only the state but also corporations and lobbying interests, the media, universities and school systems, the medical establishment, and, well, just about every aspect of modern life. *Vermont Commons* writers have argued that this emerging empire destroys as much as it creates, diminishes and despoils the natural world, impoverishes many while it enriches a select few, and imposes its will through exploitation and violence. The solution, we have argued, lies in a return to the local, the regional, the *bioregional*—to intimate and participatory forms of democracy and economic practices that respect the health and autonomy of our communities, as well as the integrity of the land and the biosphere.

From the start, *Vermont Commons* attracted nationally significant writers who were also concerned about these and related issues, including Bill McKibben, Wendell Berry, Robert Costanza, Peter Barnes, and James Howard Kunstler. Kirkpatrick Sale became a regular columnist. Other voices from within Vermont, such as the well-known political scholar Frank Bryan, John McClaughry,

founder of the libertarian Ethan Allen Institute, and grassroots activists such as Amy Kirschner, Enid Wonnacott, and many others, also found this publication to be a congenial outlet for expressing their ideas.

The name *Commons* suggests that the essential alternative to concentrated power and empire is the community or the commonwealth—a shared endeavor to live in harmony with each other and with the larger “biotic community” as Aldo Leopold called the living world. As Peter Barnes defines this concept in his visionary book *Capitalism 3.0*, the “commons” includes “a set of assets that have two characteristics: they’re all gifts, and they’re all shared.” These assets may be unearned gifts from nature (such as air, water, photosynthesis, seeds, forests), shared resources of communities (streets, libraries, marketplaces, law, money), or inherited cultural achievements (languages, sciences, religions, arts).

Barnes argues that contemporary capitalism’s single-minded focus on private wealth and market-determined value has led to the denigration and ruination of the commons, a destructive process we must now reverse. “We have a joint obligation to preserve them. That’s because future generations [and other species, as he points out elsewhere] will need them to live, and live well, just as we do. And our generation has no right to say, ‘These gifts end here.’ This shared responsibility introduces a moral factor that doesn’t apply to other economic assets. . . . Assets in the commons are meant to be preserved *regardless of their return to capital*” (pp. 5–6, emphasis in original).

For Barnes, and for the *Vermont Commons* group, this “moral factor” demands that we temper the excesses of the global capitalist empire. This does not mean replacing private enterprise with some form of state socialism, but shifting both political and economic power away from massive institutions back to human-scale locations. As we look at the social and environmental effects of militant, triumphant globalized capitalism, we are urgently concerned about the quality of life, or even the possibility for survival, of millions of people and their communities, along with the other inhabitants of this planet. We believe that there is a desperate need to renew public appreciation for the commons and to adopt a more holistic approach to politics and economic life that values communities, cultural heritage, and the ecosystems that make life itself possible.

The core group of *Vermont Commons* editors and columnists believe a majority of Vermonters share these values. We recall that our small state has experienced a unique history, having established its political culture free of royal or colonial influences. In stark contrast to the imperial nation-building of the eighteenth century, the constitution and local practices of the Republic of Vermont (1777–1791) highly valued both the commons and democratic participation in politics. Vermont, although filled with industrious people, largely avoided the harsh social and economic consequences of nineteenth century industrialization. Today, an increasingly intrusive U.S. empire thwarts these qualities and values, and, if we desire to preserve them, we will need to make our state more politically and economically independent. The main purpose of *Vermont Commons* has been to explore what Vermont “independence” means and how it might be achieved. For many of its writers, this means rebuilding local food systems, developing renewable energy sources, inventing local and regional currencies and markets, and strengthening local governance, such as the New England tradition of town meeting. Yet many in this core group believe that even these measures will not suffice to resist the increasing domination of global and national forces, and that the only effective solution is for Vermont to separate from the United States empire.

The idea of secession strikes many Americans at first as completely outrageous. The last time it was tried in the United States, it was in defense of a slave economy and led to a horribly bloody and destructive war. Americans, particularly in the north, view “states’ rights” and secessionist impulses through the historical lens of the Civil War. Besides, the U.S. Constitution that forged the states into a single nation is one of the signal achievements of modern history, is it not? To deliberately repudiate membership in the United States would be to enter into an uncertain future and seems inconceivable to most Americans, including most Vermonters.

But, we at *Vermont Commons* argue, the world is already descending into dark and uncertain times, hurtling into an even darker future if the course of empire is not arrested. In establishing the secessionist Second Vermont Republic, Thomas Naylor asserted that everything Vermonters hold dear is threatened by U.S. imperial expansion, and he challenged us to defend our values by withdrawing from this empire. He explained the justification for this radical strategy in issue #7 (Nov. 2005):

Whether or not your state should consider seceding from the Union depends on your answers to the following eight questions:

1. Do you find it increasingly difficult to protect yourself from the debilitating effects of big government, big business, big markets, and big agriculture, who want all of us to be the same?
2. In addition to being too big, is our government too centralized, too powerful, too intrusive, too materialistic, and too unresponsive to the needs of individual citizens and small communities?
3. Has the U.S. Government lost its moral authority because it is owned, operated, and controlled by corporate America? Are national and congressional elections bought and sold to the highest bidders?
4. Do we have a single political party in America, the Republican party, disguised as a two-party system? Is the Democratic party effectively brain-dead, having had no new ideas since the 1960s?
5. Have you become disillusioned with corporate greed, the war on terrorism, homeland security, patriotic hype, the denial of civil liberties, pandering to the rich and powerful, environmental insensitivity, pseudo-religious drivel, and the culture of deceit?
6. Is American foreign policy, which is based on the doctrine of full-spectrum dominance, immoral, illegal, unconstitutional, and in violation of the UN Charter?
7. Does your state face the risk of terrorist attack and military conscription of its youth so long as it remains in the Union?
8. As a result of imperial overstretch, has the U.S. become unsustainable politically, economically, agriculturally, socially, culturally, and environmentally? Has it also become ungovernable and unfixable?

If you answered all eight of these questions affirmatively, then you have a moral obligation to lead your state out of the Union. It matters not whether you live in a Red State or a Blue State, the categorical imperative to secede is absolutely inescapable. This is a wake-up call to reclaim your soul—to decouple from a truly evil empire whose power knows no limits.

Even for those of us who are not yet fully convinced that we have a “moral obligation” to advocate nonviolent secession, Naylor’s raising of this previously unthinkable strategy has provoked a great deal of intellectual ferment and soul searching. It forces us to critically examine our basic assumptions about the use and abuse of power in the contemporary United States and who we are as citizens. In these pages we wonder whether the United States has strayed so far from the republican ideals voiced at its founding that the time has come to rethink the 225-year-old compact that tied the destiny of our region and culture to a nation that has become a voracious and destructive global empire—something the Founding Fathers surely would not have wished, but which many of them foresaw.

Only eleven years after he shepherded the drafting of the Constitution, James Madison authored the “Virginia Resolution,” complaining about the federal government’s efforts to “enlarge its powers.” What would he think about the national government today? Given what the U.S. corporate state has become, we might simply ask, “What would Madison do?” and we suspect that he would be horrified enough to call for another convention to give the nation a fresh start. The founders did not

expect their document, laced with compromises addressing eighteenth-century issues, to meet twenty-first-century needs. A constitution that can be interpreted to treat global corporations as “persons” with inherent rights is surely overdue for an overhaul. But if none is forthcoming because of resistance by the entrenched power structure, what shall we do to preserve the rights of actual living people and their communities?

Meanwhile, even as we are grappling with philosophical and constitutional questions, the global industrial economy has produced serious tangible problems for the planet. Climate scientists and oil industry analysts, among others, have been sounding increasingly urgent alarms about global warming and resource depletion, most notably the approach of “peak oil”—the historical moment when dwindling petroleum supplies can no longer keep up with demand for inexpensive energy. *Vermont Commons* writers have taken these warnings very seriously; they are not placated by the politicians or mass media pundits who, in the service of corporate interests, counsel skepticism or defend the status quo. To us, climate change and peak oil are real, and very dangerous. They signal that the modern way of life *is not permanent* and that we had better start preparing for a simpler, more locally rooted lifestyle. As James Howard Kunstler put it in our second issue (May 2005):

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. . . . One huge implication 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. . . . 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.

Of course, predicting the future is a tricky business. It is not clear when, precisely, peak oil will occur (if it has not occurred already), or exactly what its consequences will be. But it seems supremely foolish to simply ignore the warnings we are receiving. As far back as 1972, in the classic research study *The Limits to Growth*, we were given evidence that industrial civilization's consumption of resources and outpouring of wastes *cannot continue indefinitely*. Whether the inevitable decline begins in 2014 or 2025 or 2032, we would do well to begin preparing now. *Indeed, much evidence suggests that the decline of industrial civilization has already begun*. The climate is changing and glaciers are melting. Food and fuel prices *are* increasingly volatile. The global economy *did* implode in 2008 and it is still in danger of collapsing with the slightest new provocation. *Vermont Commons* writers anticipated the 2008 crash from the earliest issues of the journal; they pointed out how the manipulative, nonproductive activities of Wall Street and other economic imbalances could only end in ruin for the Main Street economy. Perhaps there will be a partial recovery, but the evidence pointing toward a long-term, permanent decline of global industrial civilization continues to add up. It would be stupid to reject this evidence out of a stubborn conviction that our great institutions are immune to historical forces that have occurred repeatedly over the course of previous empires. Our empire is not unique in the face of these perennial forces. The United States is not as “exceptional” as many believe.

This book gathers writings from the journal that capture the essential points of our complex and holistic analysis. Many good and inspiring writings, especially those that were concerned with specific issues or ventures inside Vermont, have not been included. I have organized these selections by topic rather than by author or date of publication. First, the contributors explain what *empire* means and why the present U.S. corporate system can be considered to be an empire. Then we explore the various social, political, and environmental issues associated with this system, explaining why smaller-scale institutions could provide relief and hope. Next we turn to underlying principles, to the philosophy of decentralism that influences our critique of empire and our vision of a more local, community-centered world. Finally, we explain how the provocative strategy of nonviolent secession embodies this analysis and critique. It is not this book's purpose to convert readers to the program of secession, but instead to invite you to ask hard questions about the institutions that govern us and the effects they are having on the planet. We trust you will reach your own conclusions about what strategies can best meet the collective challenges we face.