

# Origins of the New England Secession Tradition

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The Vermont independence effort is guided by a peaceful group of thoughtful citizens who believe that Vermont would be better off as a small independent country like Iceland, Lichtenstein, Monaco, Luxembourg, or Switzerland than to remain under the domination of an overly centralized and increasingly out-of-control central federal government. To some, the idea of an independent Vermont is preposterous but harmless, more theater than serious policy. To others it smacks of treason. Did not the Civil War settle forever the question of whether a state within the United States can secede? It did not. Timeless moral and constitutional questions cannot be settled by the contingencies of war. That secession is a policy option available to any state within the United States today is admittedly unfashionable, but it is neither silly nor treasonous. It is an option rooted in the origin and foundations of the U.S. political tradition.

The Declaration of Independence is a legal brief in international law justifying the secession of thirteen self-proclaimed states from the British Empire. Vermont was not one of these states but seceded from Britain on her own in 1777 and remained an independent republic before joining the Union in 1791. Vermont and Texas came into the Union as independent states from prior secessions. Secession is an ever present possibility in any large political union created out of formerly independent political societies such as the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, the European Union, or the United States. Since each political society preexisted the union, the political society is primary (an end in itself), while the union is secondary (an instrument). When an instrument (like the union) no longer serves its purpose, it should be discarded for a better one.

The Second Vermont Republic is possible because we live in interesting times. George Kennan, one of the twentieth century's great geopolitical strategists and architect of the United States' Cold War containment policy, argued in his autobiography, *Around the Cragged Hill*, that the public corporation known as the United States has become simply too large for the purposes of self-government. When any corporation becomes so large that it is on the verge of collapsing under its own unwieldy bulk, the only remedy, Kennan concluded, is to downsize it. And he suggested that we begin a public debate on how to divide the U.S. empire into a number of independent unions of states associated under a commonwealth model. Kennan endorsed the idea of a Second Vermont Republic a few years before his death as a worthy effort to begin a debate about how such division should proceed.

Yet for many, secession still appears alien—outside the boundaries of the U.S. political tradition. But this view springs from attending to only one part of our political tradition. From the formation of the United States, with the Articles of Confederation, on down to 1860, secession proved a policy option considered in every section of the federation by major political leaders. It was only after the so-called Civil War that Americans began to adopt the language of the French Revolution, language that absolutely prohibits secession. The French Republic was the first to declare itself a republic—one and indivisible—creating the paradigm of all modern states. But this language of indivisibility was entirely alien to the republican principles of the American Revolution under which the United States created a voluntary federation of states, not an aggregate of individuals ruled from the center.

It was not until the 1920s (at the high noon of the Western obsession with centralization) that the U.S. Congress approved the Pledge of Allegiance, verbally transforming a federation of states into

the French Revolutionary slogan: “one nation indivisible.” The result is that Americans have inherited a deeply fractured political tradition. On one side of the fracture is what we may call a Jeffersonian Americanism, beginning with the Declaration of Independence (a secession document) and running down to 1860. On the other side is a post-Lincolnian Americanism. The former is rooted in state sovereignty, favors small polities, and is open to secession. The latter is rooted in national sovereignty, views the individual states (like Vermont) mainly as administrative units of the center, and absolutely prohibits secession.

At a time when the 350-year adventure of the large unitary state has turned sour and the resources of post-Lincolnian centralization seem to be exhausted, it is perhaps time to recover and explore the Jeffersonian inheritance. The first thing to appreciate is that it was not until the post-Lincolnian era that the U.S. Constitution began to be seen as the sacred document of an organic American civil religion. In the Jeffersonian era, the Constitution was thought of as a secular compact between sovereign states. It was also a compromise that few were happy with. The region of the United States that first tested the Union for its viability was New England. Its leaders seriously considered secession in 1804 over President Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase; in 1808 over Jefferson’s Embargo of their trade; and most seriously in 1814, over issues surrounding “Mr. Madison’s War of 1812.” Secession was advocated by New England abolitionists from the 1830s on to 1860; and by John Quincy Adams and other New England leaders over the Mexican war and the annexation of Texas.

The Union created by the Constitution of 1789 was hotly debated and passed only by a small margin. As early as 1794, Senators Rufus King of New York (formerly from Massachusetts) and Oliver Ellsworth of Connecticut told Senator John Taylor of Virginia that “it was utterly impossible for the union to continue,” that North and South would never agree on public policy, and that it would be better to renegotiate the Union than to have a forced separation later. Both King and Ellsworth were Founding Fathers who had helped draft the U.S. Constitution, and both were political allies of Federalist leaders who would later lead serious secession movements in New England.

Nothing came of this move. But ten years later a more serious effort at secession arose in response to the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, which more than doubled the size of the United States. Since the Constitution had no provision for acquiring new territory, Jefferson’s acquisition was thought to be unconstitutional. Moreover, New England had a commercial and maritime economy; consequently, its face was set to the East. The agricultural South meanwhile, looked to cultivate land in the West. Acquiring the Louisiana Territory meant more states in the West, greatly expanding the power of the Southern agrarian interest at the expense of New England’s commercial interests. New England Federalists in Congress such as Timothy Pickering, Uriah Tracy, and Roger Griswold envisioned “a new confederacy, exempt from the corrupt and corrupting influence and oppression of the aristocratic Democrats of the South.” Its nucleus would be New England, “to which New York would be added later,” and with a hand of friendship extended to the British provinces in Canada.

This first secession movement, which counted among its leaders Founding Fathers who had drafted the U.S. Constitution, may seem surprising only because of the dominance of post-Lincolnian historiography that views U.S. history as the story of the inevitable unfolding of a unitary American State, one and indivisible. But in the Jeffersonian era, the Union was not considered organic and indivisible but an experiment, as Washington famously called it in his 1796 Farewell Address. An experiment that fails should be called off. And in the case of a federal union of states, each of which could be a viable country in the world, that can only mean secession. A distinguished historian of this period writes: “secession, even in 1804 was no new and unheard-of remedy for oppressed sectional minorities . . . most political thinkers of the first half-century of constitutional government had very little faith in the duration of the Union, and the statement that such-and-such a measure would ‘inevitably produce a dissolution of the Union’ was a familiar figure of speech in politics.” It is not familiar now.

What faith can we rationally have in an overcentralized, post-Lincolnian empire that no longer knows how to stop growing? Would it really have been so bad if the New England states had formed a Northeastern federation with special ties to Canadian Britain? For more than a century, questions of this sort have not been asked. But given the great changes in the world today, they can no longer be suppressed and, indeed, appear to us now in a fresh light.