

The Middlebury Declaration

Issue no. 2 • May 2005

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.

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. It does seem that we have set ourselves a daunting task. And yet almost every week the papers bring news of the continuing action of the world's powerful centrifugal force, and that should stand as steady encouragement in this

work. For example, the Basque Parliament recently approved a measure proclaiming the region to have the right to secede from Spain and proposing a plan for a new political relationship.

Of course the Basques have been asking for greater autonomy for 30 years or more, and the ETA terrorist group has killed a good many people in this cause. But what is significant about the proposed plan is that it is attempting a peaceful breakaway from Spain that would be authorized by a popular referendum. As the principal author of the measure has put it: "The Basque country is not a subordinate part of the Spanish state. The only way there will be a shared relationship with the state is if we decide there will be one." It is not fanciful to imagine Vermonters coming to the point of declaring just such an arrangement. And on the other side of Spain, in Catalonia, where the Catalan Republican Party cheered the Basque plan, the pressure is growing for something similar to enhance the region's autonomy. Catalans—whose first language is not Spanish—have pushed for greater independence for several decades now. Regionalism is so strong in Spain these days that almost all the seventeen regions that make up the country are asking for greater autonomy from Madrid.

"Things fall apart, the center cannot hold," is the way Yeats put it. He was enunciating an eternal truth that the violence of the nation state and global empire cannot negate. Power and coercion, bribery, and bread and circuses may keep large entities intact for a while, but eventually, because they are overlarge and out of scale, they collapse and divide into the real regions by which people live and identify themselves. The center cannot hold.