

Coming together to ponder pulling apart

Latter-day secessionists of all stripes convene in Vermont.

By Paul Nussbaum
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BURLINGTON, Vt. — Separatists, unite!

That was the pitch this weekend by neo-Confederates, New England free-staters, Hawaiian nationalists, and a clutch of other dissenters who want out of the United States.

The First North American Secessionist Convention, billed as the first national gathering of secessionists since the Civil War, included an eclectic mix of conservatives, liberals, libertarians, left-wing Green Party zealots, and right-wing Christian activists.

The bearded, denim-vested representative of the Alaskan Independence Party sat next to the United Texas Republic man in his gray suit and red tie, just across from the blond pony-tailed representative of Cascadia (better known as Oregon, Washington and British Columbia).

They joined folks from such disparate groups as the League of the South, the Confederate Legion, the Free State Project, Christian Exodus, Free Hawaii, the Alliance for Democracy, the Abbeville Institute, and the Center for Democracy and the Constitution.

All agreed on one thing: their disdain for “the empire” of modern America.

The latter-day separatists inveighed against government intrusion, the influence of corporations, and the loss of individual freedoms. They castigated the Patriot Act, the war in Iraq, and corruption in Congress.

“Reform is useless. Rebellion and revolution are useless,” said Kirkpatrick Sale, a New York author who organized the session. “What is left? Secession.”

But what about that annoying precedent of the Civil War?

That is a problem, the secessionists acknowledged.

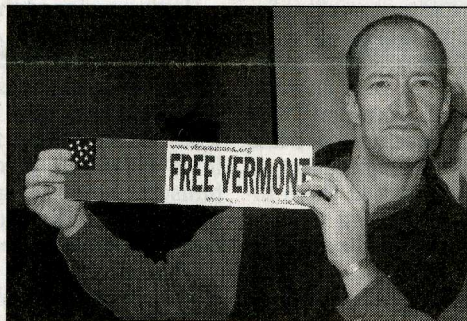
“Abraham Lincoln really did a number on us,” said Thomas Naylor, a former Duke University economics professor who is a leader of the Second Vermont Republic movement. “He convinced the vast majority of Americans that secession is illegal, immoral and unconstitutional.”

At the moment, most Americans show little interest in divorcing their government. Even here in Vermont, home of one of the most active secessionist movements,

only 8 percent of residents said in a recent University of Vermont poll that they favored secession.

The separatists see hope in the widespread citizen dissatisfaction with Washington. And they predict that global political unrest and natural disasters may soon push disaffected Americans toward the exit. It’s only a matter of time, they insist, before so many citizens see the light that the federal government will have to let its people go.

“We have to make secession sexy, we have to make it a viable option, as it was in



History professor Rob Williams advocates for Vermont independence: “We have to make secession sexy ... a viable option.”

the first 70 years of this country’s history,” said Rob Williams, a Champlain College history professor who is a leader of the Second Vermont Republic, which advocates for Vermont independence. “Secession is every American’s birthright.”

Don Kennedy, the Louisiana author of *The South Was Right*, warded off the Vermont chill by wearing his gray Confederate greatcoat, which he usually reserves for Civil War reenactments. Kennedy, a leader of the League of the South, said that was as close as he intended to get to civil war.

“We’re not going to repeat that,” he said. “What we’re talking about is not raising an army and declaring our independence tomorrow. We want to change minds. It may look impossible, but I think it’s worth doing.”

Some of the Northern secessionists quizzed the Southern secessionists about race. The 12-year-old League of the South has been accused by the Southern Poverty

Law Center of being a white-supremacist “hate group,” which the League denies.

“How can you believe in liberty and discriminate against your neighbor?” Kennedy said. “Equality before the law is something we want, and we’re on the record for that.”

Race was only one issue where the Southern and Northern separatists showed strains beneath their common goal. Mark Thomey, of the Louisiana chapter of the league, said an independent South would not permit abortion on demand, gun control or open borders, and would not take the Ten Commandments out of courthouses.

The Alaskan Independence Party representative, Dexter Clark, promptly asked about states that might want to permit abortion.

Thomey acknowledged that if a state “wanted to allow that immoral and heinous act to continue, it would be allowed.” He said that “in a new Southern republic, states may have different ideas of how they want to order their society, and if you don’t like it in Louisiana, you can get your butt out” and go to a state more to your liking.

The general tone, though, remained congenial, with animosity mostly reserved for “the empire.” At the end of the day Saturday, the group adopted a Burlington Declaration, borrowing liberally from the Declaration of Independence and asserting that “any political entity has the right to separate itself from a larger body ... and peaceably to establish its independence.”

The obvious challenge for the group was finding a way to make its effort more than just an intellectual exercise.

“I’m glad to see it didn’t implode over ideological differences,” said Cory Burnell, leader of Christian Exodus, a group that says it wants to import conservative Christians to South Carolina. “At some point, though, you eventually have to see movement. The question is, how long do you give it to come to fruition?”

David Towery, a leader of the Confederate Legion, said, “I haven’t been hearing how we’re going to make this happen. ... How do you get the majority of the people behind you and believe that this is a real possibility?”

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