

Secession
by Anthony Santelli

In these United States, the subject of secession used to bring to mind slavery and the Civil War, but it has finally lost its negative association with that particular historical event in America's past. After the peaceful breakup of the Soviet Union, after Czechoslovakia split into two nations (the Czech Republic and Slovakia), and after the Yugoslavian secessions, people have come to realize that secession not only doesn't necessarily cause war, but can be peaceful and productive.

Secession is a solution to ethnic strife and the preservation of cultural identity. Over 49% of the Quebecois (people of Quebec) voted to secede from the rest of Canada in their most recent election. They see secession as the solution to saving the French language and culture that is particular to Quebec. Similarly, many people are questioning the reasoning behind the UN's desire to force the people of Bosnia to have one sovereign. Bosnia's sovereignty was itself created only after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Why, then, are the nations of the world holding the people of Bosnia to these new national boundaries so recently created? There are three ethnic forces in Bosnia: the Croats, the Bosnian Serbs, and the Bosnian Muslims. They do not get along with each other. It seems logical that they should divide the nation into three. Forcing them to be part of the same nation only guarantees that they will fight.

One argument against secession is that there is a minimum size for a nation to be solvent. But history shows this is not the case. There are many nations with very small geographical boundaries that are economically sound and in no risk of being crushed by their neighbors, such as Singapore, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, Andorra, Monaco, and Vatican City. Small countries can and do form alliances with other countries to aid their survival on the international scene.

When, then, should a people be allowed to secede? What criterion should exist? Should it be majority rule? If majority rule, then where are the boundaries drawn? Where the boundaries are drawn profoundly influences the result of the vote. The Quebecois could have successfully seceded from Canada had they chosen to exclude Montreal from their vote. Of course, Montreal could not then be forced to go with them, but would remain part of Canada.

Why should we respect boundaries drawn by people hundreds of years ago, boundaries that were drawn to meet *their* interests? Do we, today, not have an equal right to draw boundaries of our own to meet our own interests? What makes a boundary legitimate anyway? This question can be posed not only for national boundaries but also for state, county, and city boundaries. The people of Staten Island, one of the five boroughs of New York City, want to secede from New York City. Should the State of New York have the authority to deny their desire to be their own

city? If so, then according to what principle? Asking where the boundaries should be drawn begs the question: what makes a nation? A nation is not a piece of land, but a people with a common set of goals and values. A viable number of people should have a distinct government if they want it.

We can also inquire about the legitimate realm of a government's authority. If a government refuses to allow people to secede, how can it claim to be a legitimate authority over them? Our founding fathers fought a revolution over this principle. Actually, the American Revolution was not a revolution at all but a war of secession. No attempt was made to overthrow the government in Great Britain. The colonists did not claim that the British government was illegitimate, just illegitimate over them. If we believe that the founding of this nation was legitimate, and that British rule over the colonies became illegitimate once the people of those colonies no longer desired to be ruled by the British, then we need to apply that principle consistently to determine the legitimacy of governmental authority today, including that of our own. In 1994, the United Nations drafted a resolution on the Right of Peoples to Self-determination. From October 21 to November 1 of 1996, the UN Commission on Human Rights heard from indigenous peoples who are seeking independence from their ruling governments.

If we believe in the idea from the Declaration of Independence that people have a right to the government of their own choice, then we should first find who wants to be a separate nation, and draw the boundary lines around them instead of forcing nations to their present boundaries. This would mean, for example, that the Basques, who have been seeking independence from Spain for a long time, should be free to secede and rule themselves. Moreover, if this process does not result in contiguous boundaries for these new nations, so what? There are countries that are not contiguous. Pakistan and East Pakistan (Bangladesh) were once a single country and are not attached. East Prussia was not contiguous with the rest of that nation. Some Swiss cantons are not contiguous. Azerbaijan is on both sides of Armenia. And there is an Armenian enclave inside of Azerbaijan that wants to join Armenia; should it be prevented simply because of geography? Even the United States is not contiguous!

Secession is not revolution; it can be peaceful. Secession can occur simply by a vote and a re-drawing of boundaries. It is only when the existing government desires to rule over those who want to have their own rulers that a war begins. Even in the case of our own Civil War—ignoring the discussion of slavery and whether that made it justifiable—there would not have been a war if Lincoln hadn't called troops to preserve the Union by force. Seceders prefer to secede peacefully if they can. The legitimacy of secession is a logical conclusion of freedom.

Anthony Santelli is a Ph.D. candidate in Economics at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

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