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Let's Secede!

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Announcement: The Free State Project

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Special to TLE

Note from the author (7/2/04): This article was the first exploration of the idea of a "free state strategy." Needless to say, the present-day Free State Project differs from the proposals of this article in some respects. In particular, the article overemphasizes the possibility of secession. Nevertheless, I think it's still of historical interest.

Libertarian activists need to face a somber reality: nothing's working.

Partisan politics has clearly failed: Libertarian presidential candidates consistently fail to break the one per cent barrier, while no Libertarian candidate has ever won election to a federal office. What is the chance that a Libertarian presidential candidate will get even 5% of the presidential vote in the next, say, 20 years? Virtually zero; I'd be willing to bet the farm on that. And what about the chance that Libertarians will take over the Presidency, Congress, and Supreme Court and enact their entire program? One would have to be utterly delusional to consider this a possibility so long as the United States' political system exists in its current form.

Noting the massive failure of partisan politics, some activists have argued that what we need is education. Unfortunately, the successes of education have come and gone. In academia, free-market ideas (though even then, not radical libertarian ones) were fresh and exciting in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Today there is a backlash against libertarian ideas (caricatured as "neoliberalism") in all disciplines. Political scientists view neoclassical economics as politically naïve, while even economists have become bored with perfect-market models and have gone back to thinking up new exceptions to the rule.

In response to this argument, Chris Tame of the British Libertarian Alliance believes that we should take a very long-run view. The victory of liberty will take centuries to complete, and we should not be too hasty to abandon the project of remaking intellectual and popular culture. There are several problems with this view. First, it is very depressing for those of who would like to see some measure of freedom in our lifetimes. Second, what's to prevent the welfare state from winning in the long-run? It has the advantage of fulfilling the interests of elites in government. Reinstating freedom would require

repeated large sacrifices by these people. Since people act in self-interest most of the time, the most sensible prediction is that elites will never give up their power; rather, they will reinforce it whenever possible.

Third, the long-run perspective ignores the fact that world affairs are currently at the cusp of a new direction. Freedom can still win out, at least in some areas, but if it does not the prospects are dire. One doesn't have to see black helicopters everywhere to note that ad hoc world governance structures are already in place. NATO, the OSCE, the practice of economic sanctions, and UN peacekeeping are just a few institutions and policies that effectively prevent nominally independent countries from pursuing policies that conflict in any substantial fashion from the will of Washington, D.C. The OECD is currently pursuing measures to punish so-called "tax havens."⁽¹⁾ Their low tax rates are draining capital from Western welfare states, and the welfare states want to cut off the spigot. The proposed method of extortion is familiar: economic sanctions. The vaunted benefits of capital mobility and encryption technology thus have failed to materialize, and governments continue to grow, even relative to the private economy. The implications should be clear: if we do not carve out a sphere for freedom now, freedom will be lost for a long time to come.

Some individuals have noted the hopelessness of both mass-based party politics and mass-based education. They have advocated instead the creation of a new libertarian nation. These ideas have tended to be on the fringe of the libertarian movement, simply due to their impracticality, not to mention the fraudulent nature of many of them. They invariably are run by one or two decidedly eccentric individuals who ask for substantial "investments" so that they can start work on the "infrastructure," typically of some floating island. I have to note that I think the Awdal Roads Project (www.awdal.com) is legitimate, but there are not many American libertarians I know who would be willing to move to Somalia. What we need is a libertarian project that we can undertake right here in the U.S.

Some activism of this sort has been tried, involving "monkey-wrenching" à la Claire Wolfe, "dropping out," not using government services, etc. The problem with these strategies is that: 1) they are small-scale and unlikely to make a noticeable difference; 2) the more radical projects require abandoning family and friends and leading a lone wolf lifestyle; 3) refraining from using government services in many cases hurts us (financially) and helps them, by making it cheaper for them to provide government services.⁽²⁾

I would like to propose a solution based both on my dissertation research and suggestions from commentators whom I respect: secession (or at least the threat of it). Walter Williams recently wrote in *WorldNetDaily*:

Americans who wish to live free have two options: We can resist, fight and risk bloodshed to force America's tyrants to respect our liberties and human rights, or we can seek a peaceful resolution of our irreconcilable differences by separating. That can be done by peopling

several states, say Texas and Louisiana, controlling their legislatures and then issuing a unilateral declaration of independence just as the Founders did in 1776.(3)

Other well-known libertarians have been advocating similar measures. The pro-secession views of lewrockwell.com and the Ludwig von Mises Institute are well known. Jim Peron told me he advocates peopling New Zealand with libertarians and making it into a libertarian country. Unfortunately, his immigration visa was denied for political reasons. Perhaps he will come to the U.S. and help us.

What I propose is a Free State Project, in which freedom-minded people of all stripes (libertarians, anarcho-capitalists, pacifists, even people who just call themselves liberals or conservatives - the only requirement is that you pledge that you will work to reducing government to the minimal functions of protecting life, liberty, and property), establish residence in a small state and take over the state government. I have been running some figures to see how plausible this strategy would be. There are about 40,000 paid Libertarian party members, and the number of dedicated freedom-minded people out there is undoubtedly at least twice that. In the last election the Libertarian Party won 3.2 million unique votes, 400,000 for President; 80 for every LP member in the former case, 10 in the latter. If even half of the LP membership moves to a particular state, we can expect 200,000 votes for the LP presidential candidate just from that state. Furthermore, LP vote percentages are higher for state offices: typically on the order of 2-3%, compared to 0.5% for President. If we multiply 200,000 by 4, we get 800,000 votes for governor and state legislature each. This figure is far in excess of that needed to take over some small states. For example, in Wyoming, the smallest state in the Union, there were 213,659 valid ballots cast in the 2000 U.S. Senate race. (Of course, it's mathematically impossible to get 800,000 votes in a state like Wyoming, but the point is that even 20,000 hardcore libertarian activists can go a long way in a small state.)

Once we've taken over the state government, we can slash state and local budgets, which make up a sizeable proportion of the tax and regulatory burden we face every day. Furthermore, we can eliminate substantial federal interference by refusing to take highway funds and the strings attached to them. Once we've accomplished these things, we can bargain with the national government over reducing the role of the national government in our state. We can use the threat of secession as leverage to do this.

But didn't we fight a war over secession almost 150 years ago? Wouldn't the feds just send in the troops to crush our little experiment? The answer, in short, is no. In "modern, democratic" countries the use of violence against legal secessionist movements is out of the question. For example, no one advocates using force to prevent Quebec from leaving Canada if it so decides. The assumption underlying their recent referendum on secession was that if secession achieved a majority vote, negotiations would immediately begin toward a peaceful separation. The same holds for independence movements in Scotland, Wales, Flanders, Padania, Catalonia, and elsewhere.

Indeed, the U.S. has militarily attacked countries for the way in which they treated separatist insurgencies. If the fedgov tried to go Milosevic on us free-staters, how would that look? The key is that we need to pursue secession within the political system, electorally. Attempting it extra-legally is a recipe for disaster, as the Republic of Texas fiasco has demonstrated.

There is another advantage to the strategy of secession. It is a sort of "stealth-libertarian" strategy. Most people have a lot of state pride. I used to live in Texas, and it was the general assumption among Texans that we could easily go it alone and become independent, but we stayed in the U.S. merely out of a sense of graciousness and condescension. In other words, people might well vote for a general secessionist party even if they wouldn't vote for an overtly libertarian party. Of course, once secession is achieved, libertarianism is the likely outcome if we've concentrated our forces. Furthermore, independent small states are forced to follow relatively libertarian policies to remain economically viable.

Even if we don't actually secede, we can force the federal government to compromise with us and grant us substantial liberties. Scotland and Quebec have both used the threat of secession to get large subsidies and concessions from their respective national governments. We could use our leverage for liberty.

This strategy seems eminently workable within the next decade. The only difficulty is what game theorists refer to as a "coordination problem." If I know that other libertarians will join me in moving to a certain state, it's in my interests to move there too, but if I think others won't join me, I might as well stay where I friends and a good job. Everyone else thinks the same way, and no one moves. For that reason, I think we do need a formal organizational structure. We need a sort of pledge to which we can get freedom-minded people to sign their names, similar to the Separation of School and State pledge. We would pledge to move to any state which is decided on by a majority of the members of the "Free State Society." (The details of how the voting would ensue could be worked out. My current idea is that we could have a list of states with less than 1 million population. Once the "Free State Society" reaches 20,000 members we could vote on these sequentially, with the lowest vote getters being eliminated in each round. Votes would be made public each time to forestall fears of manipulation.) Since as libertarians we respect contracts, we would rightly feel duty bound to honor our pledges. The coordination problem would be solved.

Unfortunately, I am neither an "organizer" type nor a well-known libertarian "personality." I'm an aspiring political scientist, a thinker; I don't know the first thing about leading, and my name doesn't have cache. But if luminaries like, perhaps, Walter Williams and L. Neil Smith sign onto this project, and other motivated people join to help along with the leg work, we can really get this project off the ground. We have to start a snowball effect.

It is exciting to me that we might have a real shot at true freedom in our lifetimes. Certainly, there will be inconveniences. We might have to

move away from friends and family; there might be spells of unemployment; we might have to take careers that are not our first choice. But I can't believe that we've gone so soft that we won't tolerate these inconveniences for a possibility at attaining true liberty. Our forefathers bled and died - because of the Stamp Tax! The Free State Project requires nothing of that kind, and the stakes are so much higher. How much is liberty worth to you?

If you are interested in joining this project, please e-mail me at freestateproject_com@yahoo.com and give me your address. I've already met some others who are interested. I am going to draw up a simple pledge and some straightforward bylaws for the Free State Society and start collecting signatures. I'm open to all kinds of feedback; again, I'm hoping this project really becomes a decentralized affair - I don't want to be a dictator of my own little club, and I don't want your money.

(1)OECD, 2000: "Towards Global Tax Co-operation (Report to the 2000 Ministerial Council Meeting and Recommendations by the Committee on Fiscal Affairs): Progress in Identifying and Eliminating Harmful Tax Practices."

(2)An exception is removing one's children from the socialized school system, a system so corrupt that the irreparable damage it causes to our children outweighs its conveniences.

(3) http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=21038

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