Second Secessionist Convention Report

In a rare and powerful display of unity by the anti-authoritarian left and the anti-authoritarian right, the Second North American Secessionist Convention was held at the beginning of October in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Co-sponsored by the League of the South, working toward a free Southern republic, and the Middlebury Institute, the secessionist think-tank based in New York State, the convention drew eighteen delegates representing secessionist organizations in at least 36 states. The deliberations were watched by some 40 observers and organizers from an additional 8 states.

The convention drew attention across the country, largely thanks to an AP story printed on its opening day that was carried nationwide (in the on-line sites of the New York Times, Newsday, Washington Post, and USA Today, among others), and news of the event went international, to England, Ireland, New Zealand, Belgium, India, and Canada. Several television stations attended the gathering, a short film was posted on youtube, a crew from Ithaca College filmed the entire proceedings, and more than 50 radio stations ran interviews with the convention leaders. (Much of the coverage can be found below.)

Press attention was so high in part because of the alliance among groups that on the surface would seem to have not a lot in common on political and social issues like abortion, homosexual rights, pornography, prisons, public schooling, religious observance, immigration, health care, or gun control. But none of those differences arose in the day-long proceedings because the groups were united on these overarching issues: opposition to the American empire, its current government, its war in Iraq, its corrupt and beholden legislatures, its invasion of privacy with the tools of repression, its repeated interference in state and local affairs, its quasi-fascistic affiliation of big business and big government, its enhancement of the dangerous power of international corporations—and the need to get out from under all that and restore liberty and democracy through peaceful secession.

As the convention put it in a closing document, the Chattanooga Declaration: “The deepest questions of human liberty and government facing our time go beyond right and left, and in fact have made the old left-right split meaningless and dead….The American Empire is no longer a nation or a republic, but has become a tyrant aggressive abroad and despotic at home….The States of the American union are and of right ought to be, free and self-governing.”

This extraordinary show of unity, felt palpably by the delegates around the room, made individual issues and policies irrelevant, subsumed under the clear need to work toward making secession a viable and reasonable option now for the people of the various states. That question—basically the “how” of secession, after its legitimacy and legality are established—is now perhaps the most important issue facing the secessionist movement and came in for extended discussion at the meeting.

Different groups outlined different approaches. The League works through state chapters and some of those have local
chapters focusing on local issues, including property rights, taxes, centralization of power, and public display of the Ten Commandments. Vermont secessionists work through three affiliated organizations, the Second Vermont Republic think tank, a Vermont Commons newspaper promoting the state’s unique character and history, and a Freevermont.net group working to put secession on the agendas of the 250 town meetings over the next few years. The Alaska Independence Party has web page and web radio sites, displays and sells T shirts, CDs and videos of past speeches, posters and the like (the university has proved a useful marketplace), and hopes to have public hearings on a repeal of the vote for statehood, which it regards as bogus. The Georgia LOS organization has a successful tabloid newspaper and a far-reaching radio network, Dixiebroadcasting.net, with a Southern Liberty Store that sells “lectures and speeches from the Southern Movement.”

The question of working through the two major parties also came up, with opinions on both sides. One delegate from Texas ran in a Republican U.S. senatorial primary on a secession platform and garnered more than 50,000 votes and is fixing to try it again. A Georgia delegate ran for governor two years ago on a “Georgia first” platform and plans another race. A delegate from Louisiana has been organizing around a possible entry into next year’s Republican primary race for President. Alaska secessionists have worked within both main parties. But strong sentiment was expressed that, even as an “issues” candidate, there were dangers in trying to work through established parties, who do not greet such ventures with open arms, and who traditionally have successfully co-opted or smothered maverick candidates.

Some Vermonters are contemplating eventually fielding candidates for the state legislature on a forthright secessionist platform, avoiding major party labels.

The Chattanooga convention ended with a barbeque banquet addressed by Thomas Fleming, editor of Chronicles, “A Magazine of American Culture.” His general argument was that once he was in favor of all secessions, but with instances like Kosovo, for example, he came to think that there were some bad secessions as well as good. It was not a theme that had much influence on an audience of people who, as this Second Secessionist Convention showed, were acting on the premise that any state or region working for secession, at least in North America, was legitimate and deserved support.

Cory Burnell, of the Christian Exodus movement that hopes to settle in and free South Carolina, mentioned in his presentation that a poll was taken last fall by the Opinion Research Corporation and broadcast by CNN on October 23, 2006. It found that 71 percent of Americans agreed that “our system of government is broken and cannot be fixed,” and another 7 percent agreed it was broken but “hoped” it could be fixed. That is astonishing in one sense, since we are not normally provided such insight into the popular mind, but it is a measure of what should be obvious—and it provides extremely fertile ground into which secessionists can plant their seeds. We will examine just what’s
growing and where at the Third Secessionist Convention next year, location to be determined.