

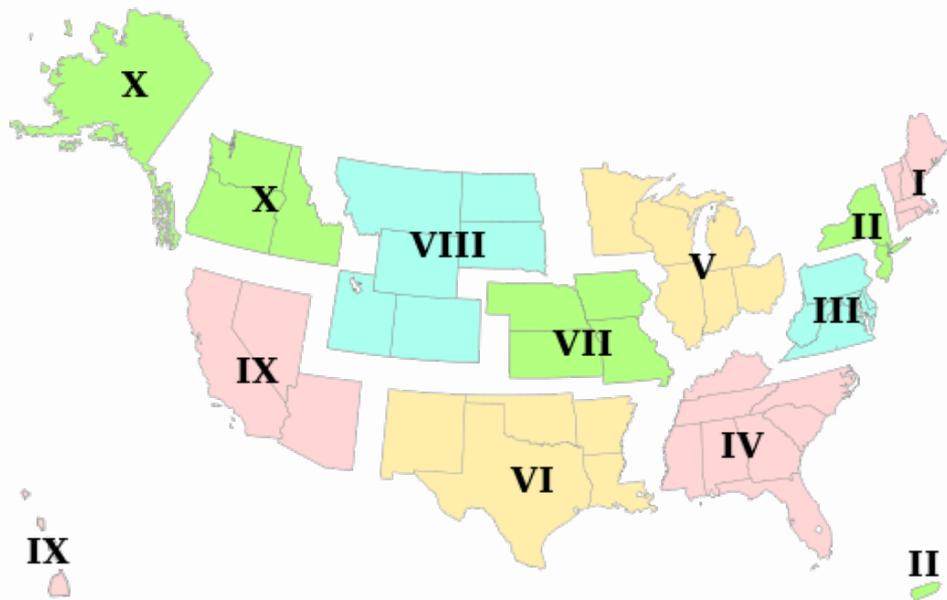
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“Secession and Messianic Statism: Evaluating the Current Union of the States, Part 2” By Allen Mendenhall

By Allen Mendenhall, February 11, 2014



Editorial Foreword: This essay by **Allen Mendenhall** is Part 2 of the second installment of a *Nomocracy in Politics* symposium, “Evaluating the Current Union of States.” Please also consider **Part 1** of Mendehall’s piece. This symposium will examine the various costs and benefits that Americans and others incur as a result of our current Union of States –a.k.a., the United States of America. The symposium will progress gradually over a period of weeks. *Nomocracy in Politics* would also like to credit **Mike Church** for providing the initial creative impetus for this symposium. Please also consider Bruce Frohnen’s earlier symposium essay [here](#).

Essay: We have, all of us, heard the axiom that the path to hell is paved with good intentions. This axiom captures the paradoxical nature of messianic Statism that pervades the American Union: employing State mechanisms to battle alleged tyranny only generates more tyranny. As Hayek puts it, “What is promised to us as the Road to Freedom is in fact the Highroad to Servitude.”^[i] Nazi Germany demonstrated that “democratic socialism, the great utopia of the last few generations, is not only unachievable, but that to strive for it produces something utterly different—the very destruction of freedom itself.”^[ii] It is worth briefly considering several ways in which the promises of Statism, when their ends are pursued, generate negative results that subvert the promises. It is worth, in other words, considering the paradoxical nature of the messianic Statism that conditions people to be dependent upon the State rather than free to pursue their own goals and ambitions.

First, let us consider welfare benefits. By doling out benefits to low-income workers and by subsidizing their basic needs, the State is, in essence, guaranteeing their continued poverty and ensuring their perpetual subservience to State power; for as low-income workers gain skills and

employment and begin to earn higher wages for their labor, they also lose benefits once supplied by the State. **The amount of benefits they lose from the State exceeds, in many cases, the amount of wages they can earn in the workforce. Therefore, they are better off receiving benefits without working than they are earning higher wages while working.** Their standard of living increases when they do not work, or when they work little, and decreases the harder and more often they work. It is riskier, therefore, to be poor and working than it is to be poor and idle. The State, consequently, creates enthusiastic dependents of those who realize that the physical and financial costs of undergoing labor far surpass the benefits of subsidized living.

Second, let us consider corporatism. Adam Smith referred to an aspect of this phenomenon as “mercantilism” in his *Wealth of Nations*. Corporatism in this sense is the governmental favoring of certain business interests to the exclusion of other business interests, often on the grounds of nationalism or cronyism. In 2011 and 2012, the Occupy Wall Street crowd decried the evils of massive corporations and the high executive salaries that dwarf incomes of even upper-class Americans. These protestors, many of them, called for more government regulation over corporations, but in doing so they were, unwittingly, calling for increased corporate power over individual consumers; for the more government inserts itself into business activity, the more entangled government and business become, and the more corporations are afforded absolute immunity and bestowed lavish privileges. The American Union, rather than enabling competition that would prevent certain corporations from exploiting low-income workers and setting prices above levels affordable to average consumers, implements programs and policies that restrict competition and pass along costs to consumers. This would not have surprised Smith, who opined that “the laudable motive of all these [economic] regulations [of corporations], is to extend our own manufacturers, not by their own improvement, but by the depression of those of all our neighbours, and by putting an end, as much as possible, to the troublesome competition of such odious and disagreeable rivals.”^[iii]

Just who these rivals are is a matter of perspective. The political classes determine who gains government favor and whose productivity should be suppressed. No regulation is able to be universal in application; all regulations must target certain businesses or groups; those businesses and groups that are not targeted are given government advantages over the targeted businesses and groups; the targeting turns on political motives and connections. The paradox is that regulations supposedly meant to benefit consumers harm those very consumers. “It cannot be very difficult to determine,” Smith reasons, “who have been the contrivers of this whole mercantile system; not the consumers, we may believe, whose interest has been entirely neglected; but the producers whose interest has been so carefully attended to; and among this latter class our merchants and manufacturers have been by far the principal architects.”^[iv] It is also possible that corporate profits and the distribution of wealth are also inextricably tied to warfare insofar as the State needs the poor to populate its military; the poor must be conditioned to advocate for policies that ensure future poverty to guarantee future soldiers.

Third, let us consider price controls. As I point out in *Literature and Liberty*, the intervention of the State into pricing mechanisms burdens consumers while the State insists that such intervention aids consumers. When prices are left to the spontaneous ordering of market forces, consumers generate and assign value, and businesses adjust to consumer demand. Apart from State control, moreover, prices inform businesses about what and how much to produce and to sell. However, when prices are imposed from the outside—that is to say, when the State dictates that prices remain at certain levels—they lose their predictive value, and businesses struggle to align the costs of their goods with consumer demand. The result is that as commodities become scarce, some goods become too expensive for those who most need them. Allegedly seeking to supply low-income workers with the goods they can no longer afford, the State now intervenes in other areas of industry to fix prices for other goods and services; the process of displacing burdens on the poor from one industry to another repeats itself until the pricing system writ large becomes distorted and even oppressive to low-income workers.

Fourth, let us consider the minimum wage. It has been almost two-and-a-half centuries since Smith observed that “high profits tend much more to raise the price of work than high wages,”^[v] but current political debates suggest we have not learned our lesson. **Walter Williams notes that 85% of more than 100 economic studies about the effects of minimum wage find negative impacts on low-**

skilled workers. The evidence is clear that raising the minimum wage causes higher unemployment rates among low-skilled workers, the very class the minimum wage is supposed to protect. The minimum wage enables more skilled workers to take jobs requiring less skill but paying the same as skilled work, thereby depriving low-skilled workers of the jobs they need. Higher wages also force employers to hire fewer employees and to raise the price of goods at the expense of low-income populations that now have fewer jobs and fewer affordable goods and services available to them. The ages and demographics least likely to vote are also those most likely to be harmed by minimum wage laws; therefore, politicians advocate to raise the minimum wage to bolster their image as advocates for the poor and working classes, but they do not suffer at the ballot box when minimum wage laws do the opposite: increase unemployment rates among the poor and working classes and deprive those classes of goods that ought to be within their means. Minimum wage laws have eliminated jobs such as fast-food workers, ticket booth attendants at movie theaters, grocery store checkout attendants, gas station service attendants, store greeters, and so forth; consequently, minimum wage laws have not only worsened economic conditions for the poor and working classes, especially among ethnic minorities, but, in the aggregate, have also contributed to antisocial behavior as more and more businesses opt for electronic and technological services where human interaction is preferable. Industry-wide standards of customer service decline as more and more employers recognize that the costs of interpersonal communication are so high that humans must be replaced by machines.

Fifth, let us consider education. Attempting to secure "equal" and "fair" access to higher education, the State has established federal benefits and incentives such as student loans. By making these loans easily available to those who are least likely to pay them off, the State enables colleges and universities (many of which are State institutions and most of which are dependent upon State resources and benefits) to raise tuition levels until higher education becomes unaffordable to even upper-class citizens. The more available and extensive student loans become, the more students grow dependent upon State resources. The paternalistic assumption that the State knows best what education low-income workers need to excel and compete in the workforce results in the infantilization and perpetual dependency of young people upon State largesse. Rather than freeing low-income workers to pursue their desired professions and interests, student loans force low-income workers to continue to pursue future programs that maximize State power. So, the State burdens young people with heavy debt, a condition that can be used to recruit more State workers, who, in turn, become complicit in State power. The State informs those who are burdened by student loan debt that their debts may be forgiven or reduced in exchange for military or government service. Through this process, the promises that student loans liberate young people by guaranteeing them a proper education in fact bring about the reverse: dependency, servitude, and limited options for career, family, and professional development.

I could continue with examples, but I think I have made my point. I do not wish merely to criticize the State but to reveal the paradoxical nature and function of State power—a power that has increased subtly and gradually over the course of the last five or six decades. The paradox is that this power has been amassed in the name of freedom and liberty for those suffering in the worst economic conditions. For this reason, it is important to remember that "in totalitarian states liberty has been suppressed in the name of liberty,"^[vi] such that the promises of freedom and prosperity often made by agents of the State can make possible conditions that are antithetical to freedom and prosperity.

It is telling that the emergence of the word "power," from the Old French *pouair* that developed out of the Vulgar Latin usage of *potere* and *potis*,^[vii] roughly coincides with the rise of the nation-state and has persisted in its current form ever since that time. *Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Edition* (1957), offers this secondary definition of "power": "The position of sway or controlling influence over others; control; authority; command; government; influence; ascendancy, whether personal, social, or political; also, occasionally, permission or liberty to act." This entry explains that an earlier and allegedly archaic signification of "power" involved a "military or naval force," although such a signification hardly seems archaic, especially inasmuch as it was included in Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary as if it were then in common use. None of these definitions completely captures Nietzsche's perspective on power that informed later thinkers on the subject such as Foucault. Not until Rothbard, moreover, was "power" properly understood in the context of Statism, for he pointed out that the State is a manifestation of power even as it exercises power. "When a government acts," Rothbard proclaimed, "individual critics are *powerless* to change the result" and "can do so only if they

can finally convince the rulers that their decision should be changed.”[viii]

Employing the rhetoric of egalitarianism, tolerance, collectivism, and sympathy to gain ideological adherents, if not outright worshipers, the State, through its apostolic agents and institutions, sets in motion the forces necessary to amass “State power,” which is “the power of man over man—the wielding of coercive violence by one group over another.”[ix] The more people the State can impoverish, the more dependents the State can control—the more power, in other words, the State can sustain. The very security of the State requires a professional military peopled by millions, to say nothing of the hundreds of billions of dollars that must be spent to support military technologies and to pursue aggressive political strategies around the globe. Having large populations of low-income workers enables the State to spend money on military technology and security (rather than on other things) while guaranteeing that there are always poor workers to recruit and to indoctrinate; those poor workers who become indoctrinated advance in the ranks and are decorated with medals and rewarded with income taken from others; those low-income workers who do not worship at the altar of State power cannot advance in society, because the State denies them the agency to obtain material benefits through their own efforts and conditions them to accept a fate of wretched poverty.

There is no template or master plan for reversing course and minimizing the power of massive, centralized governments that take the form of nation states, and in particular of the American Union that has assumed trillions of dollars of debt, strained relationships with foreign peoples, and developed secretive and invasive intelligence agencies. The American Union has become coercive and hostile to liberty. Because “liberty is not merely one particular value,” but “the source and condition of most moral values,” those who favor secession and the gradual dismantling of the American Union ought to do so on the basis of liberty, albeit not some abstract notion of liberty that is all sail and no anchor.[x] A more decentralized system in which knowledge is dispersed among innumerable individuals exercising their agency among a range of economic options is more compatible with liberty than the current, centralized American Union. Seceding territories could facilitate the process of gradual decentralization. The long-term success of any seceded territory would depend not only upon what liberties it could guarantee, but also upon the stability and order that must be drawn from the traditions and institutions that have grown out of the common experience of members of the community.

We may take comfort in the fact that, in the past, free societies have “often emerged from adversity with renewed strength.”[xi] Secession is meant to free local communities from the adversity that is imposed upon them by outside forces and to enable the native autonomy necessary to advance culturally specific programs for individual liberty that are in keeping with regional identities. The danger in a colossal “democracy” such as the American Union, which encompasses vast and culturally distinct territories, is that unique customs and mores become subsumed by the ideological programs of an elite few in large and concentrated populations. The American Union proves that democracy alone does not secure liberty. Hayek tried to warn that he had “seen millions voting themselves into complete dependence on a tyrant” and that “to choose one’s government is not necessarily to secure freedom.”[xii]

“Man living among his fellows may hope to approach” a free society but “can hardly expect to realize [that society] perfectly.”[xiii] A proper notion of liberty through secession must, therefore, consist of “a modest and even humble creed, based on a low opinion of men’s wisdom and capacities and aware that within the range for which we can plan, even the best society will not satisfy all our desires.”[xiv] Only the Utopian would think otherwise, and as Hayek cautions, “utopian constructions are worthless because they follow the lead of the theorists in assuming that we have perfect knowledge.”[xv] The reality is that as “the growth of our knowledge of nature constantly discloses new realms of ignorance, the increasing complexity of the civilization which this knowledge enables us to build presents new obstacles to the intellectual comprehension of the world around us.”[xvi] “The more civilized we become,” moreover, “the more relatively ignorant must each individual be of the facts on which the working of his civilization depends” because the “very division of knowledge increases the necessary ignorance of the individual of most of this knowledge.”[xvii]

The smaller the political unit, the more likely it is for those within the unit to know what is best for them in light of their practices, beliefs, and ambitions. “Knowledge exists only as the knowledge of individuals,”[xviii] and as more individuals are added to the political unit, the less guided toward the

specific ends of a community aggregated knowledge becomes, and the more likely it is for individuals' disparate aims to work at cross-purposes and to generate the coercion of the more powerful against the least powerful. By localizing power and dispersing it across a broad spectrum of human activity that is outside the control of a centralized State, secession could bring about the pluralism necessary to recognize and secure the distinct values of distinct communities. When government is decentralized, limited, divided into branches, and localized, fewer people can consolidate power to control the activities of others, and private enterprise may more easily supply goods and services in response to consumer demands, which are unmediated by government bureaucracies and regulations. The conception of government as restricted and concentrated within localized social and religious associations is compatible with the Catholic doctrine of subsidiarity and reflects the general organization of Protestant Congregationalist churches. Within a subsidiary or Congregationalist paradigm of governance, any particular community of people, to flourish, must base their thoughts and actions on a common tradition of religious belief and a shared understanding of moral purpose.

Hayek himself was not a Christian, but he acknowledged in *The Road to Serfdom* that his individualism "is based on the respect of Christianity for the individual man and the belief that it is desirable that men should be free to develop their own individual gifts and talents."^[xix] Such individualism, in Hayek's view, characterized Western Civilization and provided a basis for the literary, artistic, and economic flourishing of Western man. A common critique of individualism is that it atomizes people and isolates them from one another, turning them into competitors rather than friends and neighbors. But individualism, like socialism, has its own paradoxes, the most promising of which is that it facilitates cooperation and community and encourages human interaction. Properly understood, individualism is a respect for the value and dignity of every human life against the subordination of human lives to the alleged good of some abstract collective or cause. Individualism of this kind facilitates cooperation and community and values human interaction. On this point, Ludwig von Mises explains that human society is "an association of persons for cooperative action"^[xx] and that, "against the isolated action of individuals, cooperative action on the basis of the principle of the division of labor has the advantage of greater productivity."^[xxi] Mises also submits that the "continued existence of society as the association of persons working in cooperation and sharing a common way of life is the interest of every individual."^[xxii]

The individualist, accordingly, does not lobby for government to war against poverty and does not protest the failure of massive or abstract institutions to control and direct the affairs of the less fortunate. Rather, the individualist invites the homeless into his house, assists in the soup kitchen, builds homes and provides services for his fellow man, sits shoulder to shoulder with members of his church body, and cultivates understanding among his friends and neighbors and civility among his enemies. The individualist values personal relationships and seeks to *feel* the problems felt by those he knows and loves.

Messianic Statism undermines such individualism and extols the State as the remedy to all social and economic problems; the Statist has, he presumes, done well and acted morally by promoting the power of the State to intervene in the lives of the poor, but the Statist has not walked among the poor, has not shouldered their burdens or felt their pains, has not personally demonstrated to them the value and fulfillment that work can bring, nor the responsibilities that leadership and ownership require.

Secession itself is unlikely to cultivate interpersonal relationships and to facilitate cooperation and civility among members of the group, but the driving force behind secession, one such force at least, is a communitarian ethos that does prize the virtues of voluntary associations that are rooted in shared values and vocabularies.

Most American critiques of secession accent its perceived racial associations with the Confederate States of America, ignoring other secession movements that both preceded and followed the American Civil War, or the War Between the States, as well as the countless secession movements throughout history and in various parts of the globe. This trend, which holds purchase only in the American Union and surrounding nation-states, may be reversing to the extent that wealthy entrepreneurs such as Timothy C. Draper and Peter Thiel have begun to advocate for secession or something like it. If the signifier "secession" has been stigmatized, it is because those who are against it know how appealing it can be, and hence how subversive it can be for their secular religion of

Statism.

No one person or group of persons can design for a large population a rational model of secession that would match the goals and priorities of the seceding persons or groups, for a "rational economic order," such as that which a seceded territory would require, "is determined precisely by the fact that the knowledge of the circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form, but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess."^[xxiii] Secession is, in fact, premised on the notion that certain groups in certain regions ought not to dictate to other groups in other regions regarding the priorities and practices of everyday living.

The benefits of the secession of any particular community cannot be appreciated except by the members of that community. It is not that economic and political planning for these communities is wrong, inadvisable, or prohibited, but that the community is entitled to plan for itself, mindful that *central* planning "by one authority for the whole economic system,"^[xxiv] or the "direction of the whole economic system according to one unified plan,"^[xxv] leads inevitably to the type of tyranny that secession is meant to neutralize. Secession is, moreover, premised, at least in part, upon the prudent and honest notion that local knowledge of particular circumstances may be understood only by those immersed and participating in those circumstances. Therefore, as Hayek reasoned, "it would seem to follow that the ultimate decisions must be left to the people who are familiar with these circumstances, who know directly of the relevant changes and of the resources immediately available to meet them."^[xxvi] No centrally designed and directed program for action will allow local communities to flourish within their self-defined boundaries and according to their own unique values; therefore, we "need decentralization because only thus can we ensure that the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place will be promptly used."^[xxvii]

Secession brings about decentralization and is a form of decentralization. Jeff Taylor recently said,

Decentralization is the best political tool to ensure equilibrium, to promote proportionality, and to obtain appropriate scale. Power distribution should be as wide as possible. Government functions should be as close to the people as practicable. In this way, individual human beings are not swallowed by a monstrous Leviathan. Persons are not at the mercy of an impersonal bureaucracy led by the faraway few. Decentralism gives us politics on a human scale. It gives us more democracy within the framework of a republic.^[xxviii]

Taylor concludes his tome on decentralization by announcing that "social fragmentation may be welcomed rather than feared"; that "Leviathan, in its political and economic manifestations, may be forced into dismantlement because it cannot be sustained"; that the "nation has become too large and too diverse"; and that it "is time to get back to our roots."^[xxix] The American Union no longer represents America. America is dead, and the American Union killed it. In its place is a consolidated bureaucracy that carries out standardized programs to enforce uniform mediocrity.

The quality of the discourse supporting the American Union and implementing its ideological policies suggests that the public writ large has been conditioned to lower its standards of excellence and to accept mediocrity as a positive norm. Believing himself to be a freely acting agent within a civilized community, the average citizen in the American Union does not recognize the state of servile dependency to which he has been relegated or the absence of constitutional exit strategies for local political units. Man longs for faith in higher power in matters spiritual. When society has turned against spirituality, faith in the power of the State and its ideologies fills the spiritual vacuum. State institutions become consecrated through public rituals and pledges that are canonized in proclamations and precedents, and citizens submit themselves to State power with either an uncritical acquiescence or an alarming zeal.

In light of the foregoing, and in keeping with my critiques of the State, I join with Taylor in declaring, "We are human beings. We are not cogs in a machine of epic proportions. Let us have politics on a human scale."^[xxx] Such a human scale, as I see it, is not attainable except by the widespread rejection of the idolatry of Statism and by the secession of several territories from the American Union. It is too costly, from both an economic and moral standpoint, to allow the American Union to persist in its increasingly secular, increasingly invasive, increasingly imperialistic, increasingly secretive, increasingly ideological, and increasingly militaristic form. Smaller is better and safer. The failures of

small political units have minimal consequences on a large scale and in the long run; the failures of massive political totalities mean death and decay.

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Endnotes:

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[i] Hayek, *Road to Serfdom*, at p. 78.

[ii] Hayek, *Road to Serfdom*, at p. 82

[iii] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) (Edited by Kathryn Sutherland) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford World's Classics, 1993), p. 376.

[iv] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 378.

[v] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 94.

[vi] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 66.

[vii] In his 1828 dictionary, Noah Webster indicated that "power" also had Norman roots in the word *povare*.

[viii] Rothbard, *Man, Economy, and State: With Power and Market*, p. 1324 (emphasis added).

[ix] Ibid. at p. 1331.

[x] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 52.

[xi] Ibid. at p. 54.

[xii] Ibid. at p. 63.

[xiii] Ibid. at p. 59.

[xiv] Ibid. at p. 54.

[xv] Ibid. at p. 74.

[xvi] Ibid. at p. 78.

[xvii] Ibid. at p. 78.

[xviii] Ibid. at p. 75.

[xix] Hayek, *Road to Serfdom*, p. 42 (*Reader's Digest*).

[xx] Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism in the Classical Tradition* (1927) (Edited by Ralph Raico) (Irvington, New York: The Foundation for Economic Education, 1985), p. 18.

[xxi] Ibid. at p. 18.

[xxii] Ibid. at p. 33.

[xxiii] F. A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *The American Economic Review* 35, no. 4 (September 1945), p. 519.

[xxiv] Ibid. at 520.

[xxv] Ibid. at 521.

[xxvi] Ibid. at 524.

[xxvii] Ibid. at 524.

[xxviii] Jeff Taylor, *Politics on a Human Scale: The American Tradition of Decentralism* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), p. 1-2.

[xxix] Ibid. at 529.

[xxx] Ibid. at 529.

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