

Marcin Pomarański*

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Lublin, Poland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5008-2612>

How does secessionism end? No-win scenarios for contemporary American secessionist movements

Introduction

In November 2016, immediately after the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States of America, representatives of two West Coast states submitted ballot petitions for secessionism from the union and for creation of independent states. Both Californians and Oregonians justified their decision in a similar way, referring to “irreconcilable differences exist between [secessionists] and many other American States” as well as to desire to protect their constitutional liberties and independence, which could be threatened by a controversial resident of the White House (Graham, 2016). Contrary to appearances, these activities are not unusual in American political culture. Secessionist initiatives have already become a peculiar ‘tradition’ of American political movements. A tradition that is more common than ever during our century. This is confirmed by the history of the previous president of the United States. When Barack Obama began his second term in the White House in 2012, the administration received petitions calling for secession from all 50 American states, with a total of approximately one million signatures. The one with the highest number – the Texan petition signed by over 125,000 state citizens – explained their decision with the desire to “protect its citizens’ standard of living and re-secure their rights and liberties in accordance with the original ideas and beliefs of their founding fathers which are no longer being reflected by the federal government” (Parlett, 2014: 13).

It turns out that just over 150 years after the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the case *Texas v. White*, which virtually prevented any of the states from seceding from the U.S., legal and political breaking of all ties with the union is still an acceptable political scenario for a significant number of Americans. How big is this group? According to a public opinion poll conducted in 2018 by John Zogby Strategies, as many as 39% of Americans support the right of any state to secede. Although these results vary depending on ethnicity (Whites – 38%, Blacks – 47%, Latinos – 34%) and political views (Demo-

* Correspondance address: Faculty of Political Sciences and Journalism, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, ul. Głęboka 45, 20-612 Lublin, Polska, e-mail: marcin.pomaranski@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl

crats – 42%, Republicans – 35%), they suggest that for over 125 million U.S. citizens the right to self-determination is still a political, legal and even moral right (Bedard, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to attempt to characterize the American secessionist movement in the 21st century. In spite of the fact that all ideas of self-determination in the U.S. are not welcomed by the federal government in Washington, and as a consequence are dying on the vine, they have still reborn in subsequent separatist and secessionist initiatives. An analysis of the goals, sizes and motivations of contemporary secessionist groups in the United States will lead to the main goal of the paper, which is to answer the question about the types of strategies chosen by American secessionists in the situation of the obvious failure of their overarching political goal – independence. As it turns out, a significant part of such groups in a situation of collision of their own political dreams with the harsh conditions of American Realpolitik does not give up and continues their activities in a slightly modified form. Understanding the scenarios accompanying this ideological and organizational change, as well as exemplifying the groups that have decided to implement these scenarios in recent years will be the crucial goal of the paper.

American secessionist movements in the 21st century

The unequivocal characteristics of contemporary secessionist movements in the United States of America lead to a number of problems, mainly due to the amount and programme diversity of such projects. Over the past three decades, dozens of such initiatives have appeared in the U.S. They are distinguished by a diverse motivation to act, set different political goals, and also operate on incomparably dissimilar scales. These include propositions limited to the area of one or several counties, as well as projects demanding independence for a specific number of adjoining states. Each of these undertakings, together with their own vision of a new social and political order, shape the image of contemporary American secessionism. Some of them are fighting for full independence, while for others limited autonomy is a sufficient goal. Moreover, in their political struggle they invoke a number of different reasons, including arguments of historical independence or tribal separateness, as well as libertarian ideas and even in some cases racist slogans. To complicate matters further, the states with a certain level of political independence can antagonize existing territorial disputes even regardless of the position of the federal government. Taking all this into account, we are able to distinguish at least three fundamental characteristics of contemporary American secessionist visions presented if not to every initiative, at least to a significant part of this type of projects.

First of all, these are in most cases undertakings with a small impact range, limited territorially to at least a few counties and characterized by low social support. Part of them do not even have independence ambitions, struggling for some form of autonomy or changing the administrative division of the disputed area. Only every sixth ex-

ample of such political movement could be described as 'large' by postulating the self-determination of one or more American states, but even these gain only local character from the perspective of the entire vast area of the United States of America. This territorial limitation of contemporary American secessionism is not only determined by the size of the disputed land, but also by attachment to native culture, slightly different for particular regions and states. This difference shapes the so-called dual sovereignty, causing Americans to perceive their identity not only in national categories, but also in regional and local terms – for example, Midwestern farmers, representatives of the Bible Belt or Americans from the East Coast. In the case of modern secessionist movements, these local cultural features become important elements of the characteristics of new political projects. These facilitates the adaptation of secessionist postulates among the inhabitants of the disputed territory and draws a clear line between the movement and the federal government, identified with the existing conjunctures. It is also reflected in the qualitative dimension of secessionist projects by rationalizing political expectations.

Another characteristic of American secessionist movements, which is partly linked to the prior, is attachment to the U.S. independence tradition. It is expressed by the memory of the heroes and ideals of the American Revolution, which led to the independence of the new state from Great Britain, as well as by the sentiment towards the history of its own state, in particular before its accession to the union. For modern secessionists, this is reflected in the almost devoted attitude towards the *Declaration of Independence* of 1776, which in its first verses confirms the right of U.S. citizens to change government:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness (Vile, 2019: 351-352).

A special place in the canon of these patriotic values is also played by the memory of the 'national tragedy' of the civil war between the states of the North and the South from 1861-1865, which finally established the legislative and political position of the federal government expressly refusing to secede any part of the United States of America.

The third characteristic of American secessionist movements results from the conflict-generating feature of independence projects which by striving to tear off part of a state necessarily confront with the central and local government administration existing on this territory. By complying with democratic standards, 'American' secessionist enterprises almost completely reject the possibility of using violence to achieve their goals. Their activities consist mainly in the mobilization of public opinion living in the disputed area to support independence plans, which is to be reflected first in a series of organized collective actions, and then in electoral mobilization at the level of counties

Table 1. 'Large' secessionist projects in United States of America in the 21st century

	Proposed state	Secessionist groups	Disputed area
1.	Alaska	Alaskans for Independence/ Alaskan Independence Party	State of Alaska
2.	Cascadia	Cascadian National Party; Cascadia Independence Party; Yes Cascadia; Vote Cascadia; CascadiaNow!	states: Oregon, Washington, California (northern part)
3.	Christian State	Christian Exodus	State of South Carolina in later versions: Idaho
4.	Confederation of Southern States / Southern United States	League of the South; Identity Dixie; Southern National Congress	states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia in some versions also: Oklahoma, Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland
5.	Free State New Hampshire	Free State Project (until 2003); New Hampshire Liberty Party; Foundation for New Hampshire Independence; NHexit	State of New Hampshire
6.	Hawaii (republic) (monarchy)	'Aha 'Ōiwi Hawai'i; Institute for the Advancement of Hawaiian Affairs; Nation of Hawai'i Hawaiian Kingdom Government; Kingdom of Hawaii	State of Hawaii
7.	Republic of California	California National Party; Yes California	State of California
8.	Republic of Lakotah	Lakotah Oyate; Lakota Freedom Delegation	parts of states: South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska
9.	Republic of New England	New England Independence Campaign	states: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont
10.	Republic of Texas	Republic of Texas; Texas Nationalist Movement; Nation of Texas; New Republic of Texas; Republic of Texas Group; Texas Constitution 2000; Texas Secede!; Texas Secession Movement; United Republic of Texas	State of Texas
11.	Second Vermont Republic	Second Vermont Republic; The Middlebury Institute; The Vermont Independence Party	State of Vermont
12.	Third Palmetto Republic	Third Palmetto Republic	State of South Carolina

Source: own study based on Pomaranski, 2020: 34.

and states. Such action is not only to guarantee mass support for the idea of independence in a referendum, plebiscite or other form of direct democracy, but also to provide

institutional support for local and state authorities. The pro-democratic attitude of the American secessionist movements still means, however, the need to oppose the oppressive state apparatus. For this reason, by far the most popular political opponent of American secessionists is the federal government, seen as a power imposed by force, which has no legal legitimacy in individual states (Pomarański, 2020: 31-33).

The ending scenarios

The confrontation with one of the most powerful empires in the world leading to achieve independence for a state or region is not an easy task. It requires profound financial resources, solid staffing and organizational support, and a lot of determination. What if secessionists run out of these resources? One of the most obvious answers seems to be the abandonment of secessionist ideals. The decision to leave efforts to secede from the United States and finally ruin the chance of independence is realized by political movements in accordance with three scenarios: 1) deconstruction of the self-determination movement; 2) abandoning the purpose of the action; 3) modification of the reason for action. In each of these cases, secessionists definitely abandon their current main goal of political activity.

The scenario of the deconstruction of the self-determination movement is characteristic for the secessionist organizations formed around strong leaders who remain not only the creators and 'faces' of the movement, but also its most engaged members as well as organizers of most undertakings. The death of such leaders or another condition preventing them from having a real impact on the organizations (e.g. imprisonment) lead to the situation of the breakdown of organizational structures that cannot function without the main decision makers. This connection results from the fundamental relationship between the quality of leadership and group efficiency. As Stephen J. Zaccaro and Meredith Cracraft noted:

Leaders have a fundamental responsibility to raise the collective efficacy of a group. [...] Simply by engaging in effective leadership, leaders increase the likelihood that groups will accumulate a history of success, thereby increasing the members' sense of collective competence. Research has shown that the goals and strategies that a leader develops for a group have a direct effect on the group's subsequent task efficacy and that efficacy beliefs affect future group performance. [...] Finally, leaders can improve the group's collective efficacy by persuading members that they can accomplish a task well or by exhorting them to do so. Such persuasion lies at the heart of charismatic or transformational leadership, whereby a leader by force of personality and strength of vision convinces followers of the correctness of a particular course of action and, more importantly, raises their individual and collective senses of efficacy that they can achieve desired outcomes (Zaccaro, Cracraft, 2004: 413).

Although, the process of deconstruction of the secessionist movement is not immediate. In the transition period between the loss of a leader and the final disintegration of the group, members of the political movement cultivate the memory of collec-

tive successes as well as their leader's attitude and his life mission. However, the passage of time gradually cools the enthusiasm for self-determination, and the lack of further personalities capable of functioning as *spiritus movens* disintegrates structures. The absence of the most engaged members of the movement, who gathered most of their activities around, ultimately favours a decrease in determination and guarantees the appearance of apathy between the members. As a consequence, the group decides to terminate the activity or continues its only formally showing full passivity and inability to any further initiatives. A model example of such scenario is the story of The Lakotah Freedom Delegation.

On December 17, 2007, a group of Lakotah Indians, including Gary Rowland, Duane Martin Senior, Russell Means, and Phyllis Young¹, met in Washington with representatives of the U.S. Department of State announcing "formal and unilateral withdrawal from all agreements and treaties imposed by the United States Government on the Lakotah People during almost two centuries of mutual contacts" (Rowland, Martin Sr., 2007). They emphasized the inability to continue functioning as American citizens due to repeated violations of the above treaties by the federal government and state authorities. In their opinion, the result of such treatment of the indigenous North American population was one and a half centuries of persecution and social marginalization of the Lakotah tribes, which in the long run inevitably means "physical, spiritual and cultural annihilation" of the entire community (Rowland, Martin Sr., 2007). Therefore, so-called The Lakotah Freedom Delegation proclaimed the establishment of the independent Republic of Lakotah and encouraged the U.S. authorities to respect the political will of the Indian people. The proposed state was to be a community open to all people, referring to the traditional Indian idea of self-determination, in practice taking the form of a confederation based on libertarian principles, in which the main decision-making body will be the Tribal Elders, and the official languages of English and Lakota. The project also had precisely defined boundaries – based on the rivers: Yellowstone (in the north), North Platte (in the south), Missouri (in the east). The population of the Republic of Lakota was estimated at about 175,000. The originators also emphasized that they treat this project in the words of tribal symbolism as a return to the sovereign power of colonial Indians. Therefore, the national flags of the Lakotah tribe and the United Sioux Tribes were recognized as national symbols of the Republic of Lakotah (Means, 2009).

Despite the efforts, The Lakotah Freedom Delegation has never received any official support from the North American Indian authorities, or even from the Lakotah Tribal Council. Therefore, the Indian secessionists gathered around the most active and famous of their leaders, Russell Means, a well-known actor, controversial politician and long-time activist for Indian rights. The project of the Republic of Lakotah was developed over the next 5 years. The death of Means in 2012 strongly overturned the seces-

¹ Also using their Indian names: Teghiya Kte Canupa, Gluha Mani, Oyate Wacinyapin, Mni Yuha Najin Win, respectively.

sionist ideas of the Lakotah Indians. Although the memory of the republic is still alive, as evidenced by the still maintained websites of the Republic of Lakotah, in the minds of the Indians the project ceased to function as a real political undertaking. Instead, the project is only seen as a part of the spiritual tradition of Lakotah, which is definitely a thing of the past (Toensing, 2008).

Two further scenarios are related to the ideological crisis that may appear among members of the secessionist group. Unlike in deconstruction of the self-determination movement, these scenarios are not so clearly related to the nature of group leadership. The crisis is more often caused by disappointment and frustration due to the lack of tangible results of secessionist activities. A sense of 'lost time' or mere reluctance to continue the self-determined 'Quixote's fight against windmills' can lead to the abandonment of pro-independence ideals, as Christian Exodus group did in South Carolina or the Free State Project did in New Hampshire. Equally often, this disappointment and frustration also induce representatives of secessionist groups to mitigate their position and focus on more realistic objectives. This decision was made for instance in 2016 by Rob Williams of Second Vermont Republic, proposing a transition from independence demands to a strategy of gradual deepening of the autonomy of the state of Vermont.

Christian Exodus was founded in 2003 by Cory Burnell and Jim Taylor, who encouraged thousands of American Christians to settle in one particular U.S. state, ultimately creating the perfect theocratic community. The initiative was a symbol of disapproval of the treatment of Christians in the U.S. at the beginning of the 21st century, as well as an expression of disappointment with the presidency of George W. Bush. The organization chose South Carolina as its goal, which was characterized by "a constitutionally limited government built on Christian values" (Jesep, 2008: 155). Not without significance was the fact that three quarters of the population of the state are persons declaring belonging to Christian denominations. Moreover, the state had a rich secessionist tradition, which also played an important role in choosing a place (Jesep, 2008: 155). In particular, that Burnell and Taylor took it for granted that they would need to secede from the United States of America because of the religious and political nature of the planned venture. The ambitious plans of Christian Exodus leaders could not be implemented even to a moderate degree. By 2008, only about 20 Christian families had decided to move to South Carolina. Changes in the leadership of the movement led to the gradual closing of the organization to the outside world. These changes eventually transformed the movement into a Christian theocratic enclave near Fort Mill, South Carolina, which completely abandoned secessionist plans.

The Second Vermont Republic organization demanding independence for one of the smallest states in the U.S. was also founded in 2003. The initiator and most active activist of the group was Thomas Herbert Naylor, retired professor of economics at Duke University and corporate economic consultant. Political and social activity did not translate into political success in the case of this organization as well. In 2012, the Vermont sepa-

ratist movement was weakened by the death of its leader. His departure clearly quenched the enthusiasm of most movement activists who fell into organizational chaos and ideological apathy. At the same time, Naylor's death gave rise to a new generation of activists for whom Vermont's independence was not a crucial goal. Rob Williams, who initiated the Plan V Campaign in 2016, which centered on the idea of "Vermont Interdependence" (intentional wordplay with the expression "Vermont Independence"), stood out among this group. Williams rejected independence goals in favour of a decades-long period deepening Vermont's cultural and economic autonomy. Among the proposals submitted were: the establishment of an independent state bank, which will be the only credit institution for residents of the state; creation of an independent energy network based on renewable sources; increasing the role of the used direct democracy procedures (town meetings). According to Williams, such actions will result in greater autonomy of the state, as well as allow the formation of the "Vermont identity", which will ultimately stimulate residents to fight for their national interest (Williams, 2016: 1-28).

The continuing scenarios

The ending scenarios are characteristic for smaller secessionist movements. Groups with a more extensive organizational structure, greater number of members and collective leadership are far less likely to abandon their self-determination mission. For the latter, still unrealized desire for independence is not so much a source of frustration as a motive for further action. However, the decision to continue the fight for independence is not dictated only by ideological reasons. It usually has to be underpinned by social and economic arguments. Political movements that decide on the continuing scenarios must be characterized by financial independence guaranteeing the possibility of fighting for many years. Moreover, those are the movements with an extensive personnel base and complex, multi-level management, ensuring uninterrupted implementation of the assumed activities, even in the event of the death or arrest of some of their leaders. It seems that organizations deciding to continue the fight against the U.S. federal government are also foreordained to adapt one of three possible scenarios: 1) political duration; 2) internationalization of the problem; 3) radicalization.

The first scenario assumes the long-term maintenance of secessionist goals without any clear qualitative changes in their structure. In this case, the independence becomes the primary political dream for members of the movement, as well as their final achievement. Even if this is not possible at the moment, supporters of such solution are determined to maintain their political readiness to take effective and quick action to obtain this independence when the opportunity arises. That is why the political duration scenario characterizes the largest contemporary secessionist groups in the U.S., such as the Texas Nationalist Movement. The group was formed in 2003 in Overton by Daniel Miller referred to as the new interim government of independent Texas. The leader proudly

promoting statistics emphasizes that TNM has over 353,000 registered members, finding supporters among both Republicans and Democrats. With such considerable support, the Texas Nationalist Movement can afford to last for many years on the Texas political scene, skillfully maneuvering between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Conducting additional activity and publishing provide the organization with financial independence and enable engaging in long-term ventures. For example, after the 2014 referendum on Scotland's independence, Miller announced in the media that intensified efforts would be made to repeat the "British scenario" in Texas, pointing to the considerable role of social media in shaping the national awareness of the state's residents. These activities were to last until no matter how long it was necessary (Miller, 2014).

Instead of previous scenarios, the internationalization of the problem is most characteristic for American secessionists with support from organizations and movements outside the United States. Such support guarantees giving publicity to the secessionist initiative outside the country's borders, as well as facilitating the acquisition of foreign allies who can use the entire repertoire of diplomatic efforts to support self-determination initiatives. In the case of American political movements, the scenario of internationalization of the problem was adopted by representatives of tribal secessionism. Native independence fighters are trying to give their claims a transnational dimension, which results in their unwavering commitment to the work of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues or the International Indian Treaty Council. Undoubtedly, the direction of action in this case is indicated by the Alaskan Inuits, whose involvement in the Inuit Circumpolar Council and the adoption in 2009 of The Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic strengthened the community's demands so much that they were heard in Washington.

The ICC document was not a declaration of sovereignty in the state-forming sense, but an expression of concern that the international community (Norway, Denmark, Canada, USA and Russia) is deciding on Arctic issues without the participation of representatives of peoples living in these areas for generations. Moreover, the declaration referred to arguments of a moral nature rather than international law, and therefore was not binding on any of the countries concerned. This does not mean, however, that it went unnoticed without causing specific political reactions. These already appeared in March 2010, when the Canadian government planned a meeting on the Arctic in Chelsea, Quebec and did not invite representatives of the indigenous minority, but only representatives of the countries concerned. The U.S. Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, publicly reprimanded then the 'oversight' of the meeting organizers, stating: "Significant international discussion on Arctic issues should include those who have legitimate interests in the region. And I hope the Arctic will always showcase our ability to work together, not create new divisions" (Byers, 2013: 233-234). Consequently, no further meeting on polar issues at such a high political level was held without representatives of indigenous people.

In extreme cases, contemporary secessionist groups advocating continuing the political struggle may decide to radicalize their actions. This process is expressed both in the ideological and practical sphere, although the specificity of the political culture of the United States makes this scenario extremely rare. For now, disturbing symptoms of such radicalization can only be seen in the League of the South. The organization's goal is to create a "free and independent republic of the South" which would function under the name Confederation of Southern States and cover as many as 15 U.S. states, including states that historically seceded in 1861: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and in addition: Oklahoma, Missouri, Kentucky and Maryland. Such a political entity with 2.5 million square kilometers and 125 million inhabitants would *de facto* detach one third of U.S. territory (Hague, Sebesta, Beirich, 2008: 1-3). League of the South supports the idea of "white regionalism", emphasizing not only the historical and cultural differences separating it from the rest of the United States of America, but seeking a much deeper, ethnic ration (Hague, Sebesta, Beirich, 2008: 8). The organization has evolved over the past 25 years, gradually moving away from neo-confederate and paleoconservative values in favour of extreme racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric. The establishment of the paramilitary subgroup Southern Defense Force in 2017 could mean further radicalization and plans to move to more confrontational street activities in the near future (Hague, Sebesta, Beirich, 2008).

Conclusions

The scenarios presented above certainly do not exhaust the extensive range of activities that can be adapted by modern American pro-independence movements at the moment of the collision of their fleeting political ambitions with the uncompromising position of the federal government. However, these are definitely the most common ways to respond to a protracted secessionist dispute. What connects all these no-win scenarios is a certain civic belief in the power of *vox populi*. Each of the contemporary secessionist movements listed above, both at the stage of the struggle for independence and during the adaptation of the selected no-win scenario, did not consider the use of violence against opponents of independence living in the disputed area. Even the hostility of the League of the South members was directed not against the Southerners, but against 'newcomers' representing other, non-native cultures. In each of these cases, the political change was to be made with the common consent of the inhabitants of the disputed area and with their mass social, financial and electoral support. This unique characteristic makes us aware that contemporary American secessionist movements, with all their ideological divergences, remain deeply immersed in U.S. political culture. One may be tempted to say that from the beginning to the end they are implemented 'in the American style'.

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Key words: political secession in United States of America, contemporary self-determination movements

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