

# The Violence of the Centralized State

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The time has come for a third American Revolution. The first revolution occurred in 1776, when thirteen out of thirty British colonies in the western hemisphere seceded to prevent consolidation into an increasingly centralized British empire. John Adams, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson were secessionists. The second revolution, the opposite of the first, occurred between 1861 and 1865 (the misnamed “Civil War”) to create a consolidated American Union that could compete with the empires of Europe; a regime “one and indivisible” from which secession would be impossible.

After the so-called “civil war,” what had been sovereign American states in a federation became little more than counties in an indivisible United States empire. It seemed to many observers that such an empire was a necessary instrument of human progress. But over time, it has become the greatest concentration of financial, political, and military power in history. It has divided the globe into five military districts and seeks “full-spectrum dominance.” In such a regime—by virtue of its sheer size—the ancient republican ideal of human-scale societies living under laws they themselves have made is no longer possible. The third American revolution would be a reenactment of the first: secession, not from the British Empire, but from the United States, which has emerged as the most powerful empire of the twenty-first century.

There is every reason to think that democratic secession by referendum in the twenty-first century United States would be peaceful, unlike that in 1861. During the nineteenth century, states competed for territory in colonies and in Europe. During the Napoleonic wars, France had invaded Germany as well as other states. And Germany would later invade France. But that age is over. Few countries today show an interest in acquiring new territory by force, either by acquiring colonies or by taking their neighbor’s territory. There are other avenues to attain power and influence. Polls show that a majority of Scots and English support the secession of Scotland. Should Scotland secede, would London launch an invasion to force them back into the UK? It is highly unlikely. The same is true of Quebec seceding from the Canadian federation. We live in a different age.

Yet there remains a deep and mysterious prejudice against secession. It is generally assumed, without argument, that large centralized states are a good thing and that any division into smaller states (Vermont seceding from the United States, for example) would be a bad thing. Article VII of the U.S. Constitution ordains that only nine states are needed to form the United States. The steady addition of states up to fifty was not viewed as a bad thing. But the secession of eleven states in 1861 to form a federation of their own was suppressed by the bloodiest war of the nineteenth century.

Why the prejudice against secession? The answer, famously stated in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651), is that large centralized states are thought necessary for peace, security, and prosperity. Systems of small states, so the thinking goes, inevitably yield petty quarrels and endless civil wars in a territory. The only way to prevent this is by creating what has come to be called “the modern state,” a central government with a territorial monopoly on coercion.

From this logic it follows that, once established, a modern state cannot be divided by secession. It is “one and indivisible.” Within the territorial monopoly on coercion, individuals are free to pursue their life plans in a civil condition. The larger the territory, the greater the sphere of individual liberty. Consequently, to talk of the territorial division of the state through secession is to raise the horrible specter of anarchy and to throw into question the very possibility of individual liberty.

The first problem with this self-congratulatory picture of the modern state as providing the best conditions of peace and security is this: Such a vision overlooks the violent history of the modern state's origins. A vast centralized state such as France or Germany did not and could not have originated at that size and scale. All political order begins small. Large states are nearly always the result of conquest or usurpation. Medieval Europe was composed of thousands of independent and quasi-independent political units. As late as 1700, the region known as Germany was composed of more than 200 countries and some 50 free cities. By 1828, monarchs had forcibly consolidated all but 38. By 1870, the whole was unified into a single monster state. This violent process of unification through a policy of "blood and iron" was well underway in the mid-seventeenth century when the modern state system was first acknowledged in international law. It did not reach North America, however, until the late nineteenth century.

The American Civil War, probably the most morally sanitized war in history, was not a holy crusade to abolish slavery—as Americans deeply need to believe—but a typical nineteenth century war of "unification." Prior to Lincoln's invasion, America was not a modern nation state, but an inchoate federation of states that had delegated only enumerated powers to the central government: mainly defense, inter-state commerce, and foreign treaties. Had this nineteenth century war of "unification" been fought with today's population, it would have resulted in more than 5 million battle deaths and perhaps twice that number wounded and missing.

Wars of "unification" and large-scale state-building were viewed in the nineteenth century as progressive movements, creating islands of peace, individual liberty, and prosperity in an anarchical world. Subsequent history has suppressed the high moral cost of building large, centralized modern states. To this, one might reply that once established (and however violent its origins might have been), modern states have been distinguished by two features: liberty and prosperity. But is this really true? Large-scale modern states consolidate vast financial, political, and military resources. This creates a dynamic center of power that inevitably falls into competition with surrounding states and leads to war. The rise of the modern state has gone hand in hand with expanding the scale, intensity, and destructive power of war.

The large-scale state system was created by monarchs over a period stretching from the fourteenth century to the French Revolution. Everywhere the story was the same: each king searching for more territory, revenue, troops, and a more efficient administrative system to make his realm "one and indivisible." As the forced consolidation of smaller political units into larger ones grew, so did the size of the king's armies and the scale of war. The battle of Poitiers, the most important of the fourteenth century, engaged 50,000 men. Three centuries later the number of troops available to monarchs had changed little. The battle of Nordlingen in 1648 engaged 65,000. This battle ended the Thirty Years War, making possible the treaty of Westphalia, which historians fix as the beginning of the modern state system. This more efficient and expansive form of centralization was called "absolute monarchy." It was praised for the peace it enforced within the state's territory, but it also enabled the king to extract more men, resources, and revenue from his realm than ever before. Armies would now triple in size over what they had been for the last three centuries. The battle of Malplaquet in 1709 would engage 200,000, as opposed to the 65,000 at Nordlingen only sixty years earlier.

As monarchs fine-tuned their territorial monopoly on coercion into an evermore efficient machine for extracting resources, resistance appeared in the form of a discourse of liberty and republicanism. This discourse claimed that war was due to kings and aristocracies. Kant argued that replacing monarchies with republics would diminish war. If the people were sovereign, he thought, they would never vote to squander their blood and treasure in senseless wars of glory. But this hope (still indulged by many today) proved illusory. The French Revolution replaced the person of the king with the person of the French nation as sovereign. Soon all of Europe would be speaking in a

republican or democratic idiom, and, by the end of the nineteenth century, the age of large-scale mass democracies would be established. But there would be no diminishing of war.

Indeed, war would now expand on a scale and intensity unthinkable to the kings who had been overthrown. The reason is that, bad as they were, monarchies were limited in the resources they could extract from society, due to the resistance that could be made by independent social authorities (such as the nobility, church, provincial governments, and an independent judiciary), all of which had titles as good as the king's. The state, in mass democracies, eliminated or weakened these independent buffers to centralization and, consequently, had a freer hand in extracting resources. In his book *Democracy: The God That Failed*, Hans Hoppe argues that in the period of monarchy that ended in the mid-nineteenth century, kings were never able to extract more than 5 percent to 8 percent of GNP; whereas modern democracies have been able to extract from 40 percent to 60 percent.

No eighteenth-century monarch, for example, could have imposed an income tax or ordered universal conscription. But mass democracies, beginning with the French Revolution in 1789, could and did. The result was a spectacular growth in centralized financial and military power. On the eve of the French Revolution the armies of European monarchs had grown to unprecedented size: France, 180,000; Prussia, 195,000; Austria, 240,000. But by ordering universal conscription, the new French republic could place in the field more than the total of all three kingdoms. The force of 600,000 that Napoleon brought into Russia was, at the time, the largest force ever assembled in a single theater in history. By the end of the Napoleonic wars, the French republic had raised some 3 million troops! A century later, as each turn of the ratchet of centralization grew progressively tighter, the modern state showed what it could really do. World War I resulted in around 11 million battle deaths, and millions more wounded and missing—a mortality rate greater than all the wars fought in Europe in the two preceding centuries.

And civilians were no longer safe. The code of civilized warfare, established by monarchs in the early eighteenth century, prohibited war against civilians. According to the distinguished British military historian B. H. Liddell-Hart, this code was broken by the Lincoln Administration—the first government in modern history to direct war against civilians. By 1945, the distinction between civilians and combatants had entirely collapsed. Some 60 million died in World War II, which amounts to 29,000 killed every day for six years!

But not even war has been the worst of it. R. J. Rummel has carried out extensive research to determine the number of people killed by their own governments. He estimates that nearly four times as many people have been killed by their own governments as have been killed in all the wars, domestic and foreign, fought around the globe in the twentieth century (See his *Death by Government*). It is as if nuclear war had occurred, Rummel concludes, and no one noticed.

Far from establishing peace and security within its borders, the vast-scale modern state, in its 350-year career, has been a greater threat to human life within those borders than wars from foreign invasion. Viewed in this light, can we continue to assert the Hobbesian postulate that large centralized modern states are necessary for peace and security without being ashamed of our credulity?

There is no escaping the conclusion that the modern state—defined as a territorial monopoly on coercion that can expand but can never be divided by secession because it is “one and indivisible—is and continues to be a baneful instrument. Indeed, the modern state itself can be viewed as a weapon of mass destruction that has to be managed and restrained with more care than nuclear weapons. Nuclear fission requires the concentration and acceleration of forces. Division makes fission impossible. Where it is possible and prudent to do so, we should support the territorial division of modern states through peaceful secession.

Thomas Jefferson imagined that as Americans moved westward, they would form new states that would secede and form new Unions of states. Had Jefferson's vision of three or more American

Unions on the continent been realized, it is doubtful that all would have agreed to enter World War I, or that any one of them would have done so on its own. Americans were strongly opposed to fighting in a European war in 1914 and in 1940, but the dazzling prospect of imperial leadership—of reconstructing Europe according to an ideology of human rights—danced before Wilson’s (and later Roosevelt’s) eyes. A similar vision of reconstructing the Middle East—and indeed of leading a “global democratic revolution,” backed by force if need be—has guided U.S. foreign policy whether in the hands of “liberals,” or “neoconservatives.” These hubristic visions are made possible by the sheer size and scale of the U.S. empire. A Jeffersonian division of the empire into three or more unions (each of which would surpass the larger European states) would considerably reduce the temptation to such fantasies.

To be sure, liberty and prosperity have been enjoyed in large modern states, but the enjoyment has been episodic. And it is arguable that it has been achieved in spite of monster-centralized states, not because of them. Little states such as Switzerland and Norway have refused to join the European superstate; yet they are regularly in the ten richest states in the world. Norway was the richest in 2006.

A thoughtful public debate on how to break up this ever-expanding latter-day Tower of Babel—first established by the egoism of monarchs and made worse by mass democracy—is long overdue. The natural place for this debate to begin is in the land of the Declaration of Independence, where the just-emerging modern state met its first successful resistance.