

## With Trump Out of the White House, Will His Followers Secede?

Doug Bandow

January 21, 2021

Could House Republican Conference Chair Liz Cheney inadvertently set off America's great second secessionist wave? If so, what would the new country be called? The United States of Trump?

When the Democratic House majority moved to impeach President Donald Trump in the aftermath of the occupation of the Capitol building, Cheney was one of 10 Republicans to vote in favor. Folks back home in Wyoming weren't happy and promised a primary challenge. They also are talking about seceding.

State Republican Party Chairman Frank Eathorne declared,

*Many of these Western states have the ability to be self-reliant, and we're keeping eyes on Texas too and their consideration of possible secession. Now, they have a different state constitution than we do as far as wording, but it is something that we're all paying attention to.*

An obscure little event known as the Civil War was thought to have settled the question of secession with a firm "no." But President Joe Biden might turn out to be more pacific than President Abraham Lincoln. Even in the midst of the Civil War there were unionists who believed their "erring sisters" should be allowed to go in peace. That sentiment grew along with the cost of the war, which ultimately killed some 750,000 Americans, the rough equivalent of eight million today.

Aiding any potential Wyoming secessionists is the fact that there aren't 750,000 let alone eight million people in Wyoming to kill. And most Americans wouldn't notice if the state left. That is no knock against Wyoming. It just doesn't impose itself on the rest of the country. It is a long way from most people. Moreover, designed by God for the outdoors-minded, it is part of the "flyover country" studiously avoided by most coastal elites. How long would it take the majority of Californians or New Yorkers to realize that Wyoming was missing from the union? How many of them know that Wyoming *is part of the union now*?

But Eathorne posits the possibility of more than just Wyoming going out. Truth be told, that doesn't seem terribly likely. Even Texas hasn't shown burgeoning popular desire to lead a secessionist parade. Over the years Texans appear to have done pretty well maintaining their influence in Washington.

Equally important, who would join if Texas marched out? While there is a Trumpian core to America, many of those states are politically purplish, especially competitive below the presidential level.

*It certainly would be imprudent to secede from the United States. It probably would be illegal. But it would be foolish and wrong to kill those who wanted to leave.*

In the 1860 election, the most important fault line, slavery, was defined through geography. Today the fault line is ideological/cultural/economic and spreads across the nation. There are geographic concentrations, of course. Stifling sanctimonious leftie wokedom — based on the principle that incorrect thoughts are worse than criminal behavior — dominates the West Coast, New York, and New England and large urban areas and college towns elsewhere. Trumpism triumphs in more rural, traditional, and blue-collar communities. Suburbs may be the most important political battleground, which shifted against Trump, though more for his behavior than beliefs.

These broad divisions are not new, however. California always has been at least two states, with the interior, most notably the agricultural San Joaquin Valley, very different from the coasts. New York always has had an upstate that contrasts sharply with “The City,” which most people around the world think of as representing New York. Oregon is similarly divided, with a third of the population living in rural areas spreading eastward.

Thus an ideological secessionist movement would be messy, pulling apart established states and regions. Political minorities would be left behind on both sides of the new division. Indeed, their sense of isolation would be intensified if they found themselves to be a minority everywhere in what was their new country.

The only alternative would be a massive campaign of “ideological cleansing,” with mass migrations both ways between the Woke Utopia and Trump Kingdom. There are historical models, but not ones we would want to emulate. For instance, mass expulsions of ethnic Germans followed the end of World War II, with millions forced from the Soviet Union and Poland, which gained formerly German lands, and Czechoslovakia, many of whose ethnic Germans had backed Nazi Germany. The 1947 British “partition” of its colony of India into Muslim-dominated Pakistan and Hindu-dominated India was even more brutal, forcing as many as 20 million people from their homes. In both instances mass death and hardship were the norm.

But there’s no reason why that would have to be the case between red and blue America. Indeed, the competing duos of Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer and Kevin McCarthy and Mitch McConnell might be only too happy to be rid of the other twosome. That should yield ready agreement over a relatively painless population swap. After recent events many members of the red and blue tribes might race for a chance to be among their own.

The more serious challenge would be for those who wanted to stay. Imagine being the last MAGA hat-wearing, gun-toting, flag-waving red-stater in an otherwise blue Chicago neighborhood. Or the only Hillary Clinton fan amid miles of cornfields in the American heartland. What kind of guarantees could be offered by the respective governments for physical safety and equal, nondiscriminatory treatment? Would a UN peacekeeping force be necessary? Perhaps America’s European allies, after spending 75 years relying on U.S. protection, would finally be prepared to reciprocate!

The most important question is whether Washington would be prepared to let Wyoming, Texas, and others go. In 1861, raw nationalism won out. Strictly speaking, the Civil War was not a civil war. That term is usually applied when two or more sides fight for control of the whole. Rabid

secessionists, the so-called “fire-eaters,” did not want to conquer the free states. Rather, having lost democratic control of the national government, the South wanted to separate.

While the conflict has taken on mythical and sacred dimensions, the North responded by invading not to end slavery, which most Northerners passively accepted if not actively supported, but to halt secession. Lincoln made clear that the Union was his priority, and Northerners would not have flocked to the national colors if abolition had been his objective. Had the war ended quickly — imagine Robert E. Lee accepting Lincoln’s offer of command of the northern armies — slavery would have been left undisturbed where it existed, though it would have been barred from any new territories.

That did not happen. The fighting continued, and military necessity led to the Emancipation Proclamation. This wartime measure ultimately was undergirded by the 13th Amendment, which banned slavery and involuntary servitude. In this way bloody-minded nationalism had positive moral impact, providing the practical impetus to ban slavery.

What of today? Nationalism generally has a bad odor, especially in progressive circles. Upon receiving a declaration of secession, would President Joe Biden send the 101st Airborne to occupy Laramie? Would Army reserves be called up nationally to occupy Wyoming? Would a Democratic Party loyalist be dispatched to act as military executor of the state?

Or would Biden realize that he was busy with other important tasks and let Wyoming go its own way? And any other states that might follow?

The only correct answer to these very unlikely questions is “yes.”

After the 1860 presidential election, seven deep-South states seceded to protect slavery. They were wrong. Then Lincoln called for troops to invade and restore the Union, while planning to leave slavery undisturbed. He was wrong.

His judgment on the constitutionality of secession remains a matter of argument today. But that abstract legal issue could not justify plunging the country into war to hold in political bondage those who sought to establish a new system.

Nor was secession treason. Secessionists wanted to separate from, not overthrow, the existing national authority. If not attacked they would have done nothing other than leave. This circumstance is more like the cases of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and George Washington than the conduct of Benedict Arnold. If Lincoln did not intend to fight over slavery, and he did not, he should have allowed the erring sisters to leave peacefully.

Finally, four states, including Virginia, which carried with it Robert E. Lee, left to defend their southern sisters after Lincoln demanded support in war. Neutrality would have been a better choice, though that would have been difficult to maintain since geographically the four — Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas — blocked easy invasion routes into the seven. Any ground attack would have to go through the Oklahoma territories into Texas and then proceed east. The four had the best-justified position among the putative combatants. It was wrong to secede over slavery. It was wrong to war against those seeking to leave. It was right to refuse to invade those that seceded.

Secession should be easier to accept today. Without slavery, the issue is simply whether political minorities should be allowed (not encouraged!) to peacefully change their political arrangements unilaterally when the majority says no. The answer is yes.

It certainly would be imprudent to secede from the United States. It probably would be illegal to do so, at least as the Constitution was effectively amended by four years of bitter war. But it would be foolish and wrong to kill those who wanted to leave. They should be allowed to make a different life for themselves if they wish, whether in the Democratic People's Republic of Wyoming or Mid-Continental American Republic, featuring Texas and assorted other states.

Liz Cheney's political future is in grave doubt after voting to impeach the president. Party colleagues are pressing to oust her from the conference leadership. A party primary could toss her from Congress.

Far more consequential for the rest of us, however, would be creation of a vibrant new secessionist movement. Leaving America over Donald Trump would be a dumb decision. Doing so to protect a constitutional republic gone badly awry might make more sense. Perhaps the only way to constrain Washington in coming years will be to revive the option of leaving.

***Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.***