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The Liberty to Leave

September 29, 2014

By Doug Bandow

As the Scots debate independence, the British government has responded with every argument imaginable—except the threat to invade. Prime Minister David Cameron is no Abraham Lincoln.

So also it appears with Catalonia's push for a referendum to secede from Spain, though the latter responded far less gently to Basque separatism in past years. No one threatened military action during Quebec's lengthy flirtation with independence from Canada. The Czechoslovakian government peacefully, even cheerfully, bade farewell to Slovakia two decades ago.

Still, not everyone is willing to accept smaller territories going their own way. Yugoslavia broke up with an orgy of violence. Oddly, the United States supported every resulting independence bid, except those mounted by Serbs. The latter were expected to live under Muslim-Bosnian, Croatian, and Kosovar-Albanian majorities, irrespective of the rulers' brutality. Washington even mounted a military campaign to break Kosovo off of Serbia, while reacting hysterically to similar Russian behavior toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which seceded from the country of Georgia. Washington responded equally badly to Crimea's departure from Ukraine, though no one really knows the wishes of that majority-Russian land, since the official referendum was anything but fair.

In international politics the only rule regarding secession is that you get to do it if you can either convince or force the other party to agree. And there is no consistency even within a country. Today it is hard to imagine Washington launching drone strikes or sending in the 82nd Airborne if Texas voters approved an ordinance of secession.

Yet, the U.S. government waged war on its own people during the American Civil War. In fact, it really wasn't a "civil war," which typically involves two or more parties seeking to control the territorial whole. In this case, it was a conflict over coerced union. Should states be prevented from severing a political connection they no longer support?

The victors write the histories, it is said. And so it is with the fighting that tore America apart. The South, of course, was no beau ideal of civilization: Slavery was a hideous blight, but removing it is not why most northerners supported war. Lincoln himself originally promised not

to interfere with slavery within the states and wrote, in an op-ed response to journalist Horace Greeley, “My paramount object in the struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery.” Had the North won the war quickly, slavery would have survived.

Moreover, people retrospectively assume that the practice could not have been ended without war. Yet, only in Haiti did a violent revolution overthrow a slave regime. Human bondage disappeared peacefully from the rest of the world. Brazil was the last nation to abolish the horrid practice, and did so voluntarily in 1888, 23 years after the end of the American Civil War.

Even more important, the Southern states departed the Union in two waves. The original seven exited because of fears over the survival of their “peculiar institution.” But the four outer Southern states—Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Arkansas—left only after Lincoln called up troops to coerce the others. One North Carolina citizen explained: “Union sentiment was largely in the ascendant and gaining strength until Lincoln prostrated us. He could have adopted no policy so effectual to destroy the Union.... Lincoln has made us a unit to resist until we repel our invaders or die.”

Washington need not have responded to secession with war. A number of unionists thought the Southern states should have been allowed to leave in peace. For instance, the New York Tribune’s Greeley opined, “We hope never to live in a republic whereof one section is pinned to the residue by bayonets.” Col. Robert E. Lee, who rejected command of the Northern forces, similarly explained, “I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than a dissolution of the Union.... Still, a Union that can only be maintained by swords and bayonets, and in which strife and civil war are to take the place of brotherly love and kindness, has no charm for me.”

For many, the prospect of serious combat seemed unlikely. Stereotypes abounded: Yankee shopkeepers and secessionist blowhards would never fight, it was thought.

But by the fourth year of war, 150 years ago, that illusion had been shattered. Blood flowed in vast quantities. In the summer campaign in Virginia, Ulysses S. Grant’s forces suffered nearly 60,000 casualties, roughly the number in Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. Casualty lists filled Northern newspapers. Unionist Sen. Henry Wilson of Massachusetts admitted a change of heart: “If that scene could have been presented to me before the war, anxious as I was for the preservation of the Union, I should have said: ‘The cost is too great; erring sisters, go in peace.’”

Moreover, by 1864 Northerners employed total war against their erstwhile countrymen. Down in the South, William Sherman announced, “I can make Georgia howl,” and he ravaged the countryside on his infamous March to the Sea. Grant ordered an even more thorough desolation of Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley. It was to be “barren waste,” he said, so even a crow would have to carry its own rations if flying through.

America’s decentralized republic also died. Washington inaugurated the national security state, with severe restrictions on civil and political liberties. Taxes and economic controls proliferated.

And Washington took a major step to becoming the Leviathan that Thomas Hobbes wrote about. After all that, the benefit of eliminating slavery was partially overturned when Reconstruction ended and Southern states reimposed white supremacist rule. It took another century to rid the nation of this horrid blight.

Today it is hard to imagine how anyone could justify killing 620,000 Americans to prevent a minority from departing what began as a voluntary political union. If there is one rule that should apply to campaigns for separation, secession, independence, and the like, it is that people should be allowed to peacefully choose with whom they desire to associate politically.

The decision to separate should never be taken lightly—for practical reasons, if nothing else. But an essential element of individual liberty should be the right to choose one's political future. And that should be the case whether one is Scottish or Catalanian, Croat or Serb, American or someone else. The people have a right to be free.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the author of a number of books on economics and politics. He writes regularly on military non-interventionism.