

Leaving the Union: Pros and Cons
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If American foreign policy were based on our own historic experience, we must oppose secession movements. We would not like to see Spain lose part of its country to a province leaving them for independence (Catalonia) or the Kurds leaving Iraq. But does our own experience with the American slave-states trying to leave the union really compare with that of the two current potential breakaway states? And have we forgotten that we seceded from England?

Our southern states declared their secession because upon President Lincoln's election, they feared that slavery would be abolished. The Confederacy believed that the institution of slavery belonged for each state to decide, although the Supreme Court's Dred Scott ruling had mandated that runaway slaves in the north must be returned to their masters. This made the issue national, not just states' rights. In a brutal, four-year war, the South lost. The union was saved from being divided into what would have been a disaster: two weak countries: the Confederacy, that intended to spread their institution of slave labor to the western territories and to the Caribbean and Mexico, and a weaker North with an industrial revolution well on the way.

Spain, as nations go, is relatively young. The Iberian Peninsula was divided among a number of Medieval kingdoms, Castile and Aragon among them, until in 1469, the King and Queen of those respective kingdoms married, uniting their kingdoms. By 1492, after extensive warfare, the new Spain had absorbed all the other kingdoms and drove out the last Muslim kingdom, Andalusia. Spain went immediately from a collection of small kingdoms into a great imperial power that colonized much of the New World.

One former kingdom before unification was Catalonia, with a culture more French than Spanish. It has always been the most sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and politically progressive region of Spain, and the last holdouts against Fascist Franco in the Spanish Civil War (1936-9). The first bombing of a civilian target took place during that war when Franco's fascist friends, the Nazis and the Italians, tried out their new air forces by destroying a hapless city, Guernica. During the entire long rule of Franco, the Catalonians were persecuted. They have not forgotten.

The Iberian Peninsula houses more than Spain, of course. Portugal, once just one more independent kingdom, is a sovereign nation with its own language. The Basques, another distinct people with a language and culture far older than Spain itself, are asking for cultural autonomy, if not nationhood.

A solution to this dilemma would be for the Spanish central government to negotiate with Catalonia and give them some good reasons to remain in the union. The Spanish government, however, is playing hardball.

Another secession movement is that of the Iraqi Kurds, with even more reason for wanting their own nation-state. They have been horribly mistreated by Iraq. When the Turkish Ottoman Empire was dismantled after World War I, the British and French drew up the borders of the new independent states that would emerge. They created Iraq, Trans-Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and governed them all as "protectorates." In theory, they were preparing them for modern independence; in reality, they never thought these people would be competent enough to run their own countries. History has proven them correct. Dictatorships, not democracies, thrive better in these artificially created Muslim states.

The Kurds were the only people denied a country of their own. Although not Arabs, and of viable size, they were divided up among four adjacent new states: Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. Unfortunately, the Kurds sit on an enormous pool of petroleum, and had they been given a country, they would have been the richest state in the Middle East. Arabs, Turks, and Iranians could not have tolerated this, and they still do not.

If anybody in that horrible region deserves a country, the Kurds do. America should support their independence. They are the only people in the Middle East (besides the Israelis) who are ready for a democracy and are willing to fight for it.

668 words

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