

Opinion: Calif. not built to become its own nation

By Joe Mathews

California may have the size and economy of a good-sized country. But California is not a nation. Which is why it would be self-destructive to seek to become one.

It's understandable why the election of an evil white supremacist swindler as president has given the idea of California independence such currency. A secession movement has taken hold in the media, made its intentions known on billboards, and begun planning a referendum. Many Californians are renewing objections to how America's outdated 18th century governing system, from the Electoral College to the U.S. Senate, works against California's interests.



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Last week, I was constantly asked about the possibility of California's independence while running a global forum on democracy. The conference was in Spanish Basque Country, whose people have sought their own nation within the Iberian Peninsula for centuries.

So I answered California independence questions with my own query: Do you think we would be better off trying to go our own way? The responses were sobering: the process of winning independence is always costlier than secessionists think.

Basques said they've sustained their effort because of a political culture that prizes stubbornness, protecting the nation's distinctive culture, and a willingness to fight.

Such feistiness is inspiring. But it is not very Californian.

We are an un-nation. The word nation, after all, comes from Latin and old French words for "birth" (naissance). But more than a quarter of Californians were born in some other country, and millions of us entered the world in some other state. Nations are defined by common descent, history, language or culture, but Californians pride ourselves on the lack of shared history that makes us so diverse.

It is our inclusive un-nationhood, and not just our political preference for Democrats, that makes California the natural opposition to the prospect of a federal government peddling racist and xenophobic nationalism. Which is precisely why the idea of an independent California country—so long discussed—is now newly serious. And newly dangerous.

To be blunt: Do we really want to answer Trumpian nationalism with our own? For our un-nation to pursue its own nationalist project would be nothing less than a betrayal of ourselves, a suicide of the universalist California idea.

It also would be a nasty business. The conflict could last decades, and the costs would mount financially and politically—and in blood.

We'd have to battle Congress and other states to get their support if we wanted to leave peacefully, and we'd certainly have to take more than our share of America's debts with us. And if things got so bad that we chose to leave without permission? Do you really think a country as violent and war-prone as the United States would let its greatest province exit without a fight? (Just ask the Confederate States of America).

Inevitably, the fighting would pit Californian against Californian. Many of us would not want to leave the U.S. Don't forget: While Hillary Clinton won California by 29 points and more than 3.5 million votes, one third of California voters cast ballots for Trump—an uncomfortably large Fifth Column.

Taking on an independence war of choice makes no sense when we already face so many other consequential fights? Climate change threatens like the big waves that I watched splash over the top of Basque sea walls. The world confronts regional wars and stagnant incomes.

Californians shouldn't waste another second contemplating independence. We must instead focus on defending our nation and protecting its people, regardless of race, religion or legal status, against whatever horrors the haters in Washington, D.C., might send our way.

But in doing so, we must be careful to avoid escalating the conflict. Ours will have to be a strategy right out of the Cold War. Contest every incursion of the Orange-Haired Empire, while carefully avoiding rhetoric or actions that lead to greater conflict or violence. Build our own alliances and collaborations with states and countries that share our values.

We will have to be especially disciplined about not impugning the motives of those who support the new American regime. Instead, we must relentlessly urge them to change their minds, and assure them that when they realize their nationalist path is mistake, we will welcome them back, like the sanctuary we've always been.

So, on this Thanksgiving weekend, let's avoid rancor at the family table. Instead let's give thanks for the United States, and for the fact that we're its biggest, most powerful state, with plenty of weight to throw against Washington.

America, for better and for worse, is California's nation. Why

would we ever surrender it?

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