

Opinion: A California-Texas summit

By Joe Mathews

To: Governor Jerry Brown of California; Governor Greg Abbott of Texas

From: Joe Mathews

If North and South Korea can have a peace summit, why can't California and Texas do the same?



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The United States desperately needs its two biggest states to figure out how to keep the country together.

Sure, you are different places. Texas is the cheap, lightly-regulated, freedom-loving counterpoint to California's progressive, cultural, and technological powerhouse.

But you have one big thing in common: You're both nation-sized places (California has 40 million people and the world's fifth largest economy; Texas has 28 million and the world's 10th largest economy) stuck in a giant country whose leaders are intent on dividing it.

The D.C. business model for elections depends on ever-greater polarization of the American electorate. So national politicians now run the government as a spoils system for

their donors and politically favored demographics.

As a result, California and Texas, despite their differences, share a common enemy: federal power.

For a century, whichever party controls the White House has seized more authority for the U.S. government. Recent presidents of all stripes have ruled increasingly by executive order. Often this dictatorial federal power has been aimed at your two states.

By now, the drill is familiar. A Democratic administration imposes policies that run contrary to Texas's conservative preferences. And so Texas fights and sues constantly. Now that Republicans are in power, it's California's turn to be targeted for its progressive policies—and to tie up the federal government in dozens of lawsuits. The *New York Times* recently called this a legal civil war.

All this fighting takes time and resources away from your states' efforts to improve the lives of your citizens. And the resentments create internal divisions. Both of your states have movements seeking secession from the United States.

The good news: together, the two of you can break the cycle.

Start with a peace summit. The goals of the talks should be twofold. First, for both states to reaffirm their American-ness and commit to peaceful coexistence.

Second, for both states to work together to reduce federal power, and enhance the independence of states and their local communities.

This must go beyond reaffirming the U.S. Constitution's 10th Amendment, which reserves for the states the powers not given to the federal government. California and Texas are now so big that they need more explicit autonomy—in taxation, regulation, environment, health care, and immigration—so that they can

choose their own destinies without interference.

The D.C. Mandarins will call this a revolution. So be it. California and Texas must declare that this is not the United States of 1789, with 13 states and 3 million people. Our country of more than 320 million is simply too big to be governed from Washington. Indeed, the best argument for greater state autonomy is a democratic one. Our states are far more democratic than the federal government, which has a presidency sometimes won by the loser of the popular vote, a U.S. Senate that defies equal representation, and bureaucracies that resist accountability.

A concerted effort to demand greater autonomy for both states—pursued jointly through politics, lawsuits, and even constitutional amendment—would be healthy. Your states wouldn't be able to blame the federal government for your own follies. Instead, California might have to confront how its oppressive environmental regulation makes building sufficient housing impossible. And Texas might have to face how its lack of planning puts its people in flood plains in the path of hurricanes.

To get the talks started, California should immediately revoke its counterproductive ban on government-funded travel to Texas. Yes, the Lone Star State has discriminatory laws on adoption by LGBTQ families, but how do you change minds if you can't meet with people?

Each state offers places where a visitor from the other would be comfortable. Why not start the talks in Austin, a California chunk in the heart of Texas, where Apple employs more than 6,000 people? In California, Gov. Brown could take Gov. Abbott to oil-rich Bakersfield for a meal at Wool Growers, which serves the cuisine of the Basques—a people famous for fighting for sovereignty.

I'm not expecting you to produce the political equivalent of

“Pancho and Lefty,” the joint album from California’s Merle Haggard and Texas’s Willie Nelson. (Though bringing Willie to the summit is not a bad idea.) But regular California-Texas summits would remind us that, while we will never be the most cohesive country, our collection of states requires some unity.

And that, in a country as diverse as ours, there may be no peace treaty more powerful than an agreement to disagree.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.