

Calexit: Should California Secede?

An interview with David Swanson

By [David Swanson](#) and [Ann Garrison](#)

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On November 21st, California secessionists calling themselves “Yes California” filed papers with the California Secretary of State proposing a November 2018 ballot measure that would ask registered voters whether California should secede from the US and become its own nation. If passed, the measure would strike language from California’s constitution that says the state is “an inseparable part of the United States of America, and the United States Constitution is the supreme law of the land.”

It would also require a special election in March 2019 for the sole purpose of asking voters whether they’re really sure they want to secede. The measure has been dubbed Calexit after Brexit, which is shorthand for Britain’s vote to withdraw from the European Union. Its author answers a long list of questions about how California’s institutions might adapt on their website yescalifornia.org. I spoke to David Swanson, Executive Director of World Beyond War and one of the first writer-activists to come out in favor of Calexit.

Ann Garrison: David, you saw the Calexit coming back on March 17th when you wrote the essay “[Secession, Trump, and the Avoidability of Civil War](#)” after California Governor Jerry Brown joked about building a wall around California if Trump were elected. Similar movements emerged, most visibly in California and Vermont, after George Bush’s second election, but both quickly faded from media attention. Do you think this is a historical moment in which they might have more staying power?

David Swanson: Well, I hope so and that’s all this is – a desire and a hope and advocacy on my part. I wasn’t making any accurate or inaccurate prediction that a secession movement would happen. I’m just encouraging that there be one and that it grow and that it be supported by those of us in the rest of the United States. It need not be a step toward chaos and balkanization; it could instead be a step toward actual integration with the rest of the world. As it is, the United States is a rogue state violating international law in many, many ways that California wouldn’t have to if it seceded and became a nation.

AG: Yes California, the campaign, needs 600,000 signatures or a two-thirds vote by the state legislature to put its California constitutional amendment on the ballot. The two-thirds vote in the state legislature is all but unimaginable, so that means it needs an almost equally unimaginable volunteer effort or somewhere between 5 and 10 million dollars to pay signature gatherers. Then, if it did get on the ballot and pass, two-thirds of Congress would have to vote to let California go. None of this is taking clear shape on the horizon yet, so why do you think it’s worth talking about?

DS: Well, I think almost everything important that’s ever happened was unimaginable shortly before it happened. Good things and bad things: ending slavery, ending child labor, women voting, etc. I think the election of Donald Trump, if you want to call it an election,

was unimaginable to most people, which is part of how it happened. I think the current state of US foreign policy with seven simultaneous wars, and the President going through a list of men, women, and children every Tuesday and picking who to murder with drones, was unimaginable. It still is unimaginable to most people even as it happens.

Climate change is so unimaginable that most Americans deny it's happening, so I think we have to work for the unimaginable and push for a referendum, an initiative, and passage of it. California, like anywhere else on Earth, should have the right to secede whether the United States likes it or not. The preferences of the other 49 states and Washington DC is not relevant. That was the position of the United States government on Yugoslavia and other places around the world but not on Ukraine. However, morality and the law as I understand it are that any people should have the right to leave, just as explained in the initial words of the US Declaration of Independence.

AG: You're an out-of-state supporter doing your writing and organizing work in Charlottesville, Virginia. If California were to secede, do you imagine that the rest of the United States might then break up into smaller, less violent, and more democratic states?

DS: I'm not that good at predictions, but I think that the status quo is not acceptable. It's absolute, guaranteed disaster for the climate and for war and peace. This, however, has a decent chance of succeeding and is therefore worth trying. It has to be done carefully, but breaking the United States up into a number of pieces could be very good for the integration of those new nations with the rest of the world and the international law whose primary enemy is now the United States government. I think that it would be very good for democracy, for people to be within some hundreds of miles of their nation's capital, as they are in many other countries, so that they didn't have to travel thousands of miles to protest, to exercise their First Amendment rights, but that is the current state of affairs in this overly large, imperial nation.

AG: Do you think the Pentagon would be particularly resistant to secession, which would, of course, reduce the tax base and recruiting pool for its seven aerial bombing wars, its 800 military bases, and all its covert operations?

DS: Well, I think the Pentagon would love to fight a war over it, just as the United States government fought a war over it in the 1860s, but the Pentagon is supposed to be under civilian control and it ought to be up to the people of the United States, not the profiteers. However, many militarists would like to see California's votes vanish from the national electoral system, which would then become more Republican, so I can't predict.

AG: Okay, let's talk about the downsides. In this essay you published on November 11th, '[Calexit Yes](#),' you note that the arguments against secession are Jim Crow and Arizona apartheid. Black citizens in a reborn confederacy, which would be about 55% of Black citizens of the USA as it is now, might face a President Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III, not just an Attorney General Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III. Citizens of Arizona might face a President Joe Arpaio, and both would have lost the protection of the US Constitution. What's your answer to that?

DS: Well, anything can become worse. The United States has been becoming worse year after year after year for decades, and it's guaranteed to continue down that path if we don't change something. I'm not convinced that the people of Arizona as a nation couldn't do

better to protect equal rights for all than the people of Arizona as part of the United States, which is actually not helping them much.

California as a nation or part of a larger West Coast nation, should other states join with California, would be a good influence on the rest of the United States. It could be a model, especially if it chose to go the route that I'm proposing which is to actually become a signer of the convention on the rights of the child, a member of the International Criminal Court, and on and on through the dozens of treaties and international standards that I go through in the article. I think that would be a good influence on the rest of the United States, and I think we would see immigration from one of these new nations to others based on which was more enlightened and progressive than the others.

AG: Okay, one of the most controversial aspects of your first essay is your argument that slavery might have ended sooner if the north had simply let the south go without the devastating Civil War. Wouldn't that have simply created two competing powers on the frontier, one slave and one free, probably leading to war just as inevitably?

DS: Well, that's essentially what did happen. There was no argument over the existing states before the Civil War was over. There was universal agreement to expand westward and disagreement over which new states to make slave and which to make free. The southern states, in fact, insisted that the Constitution required the return of so-called fugitive slaves, and they wanted to deny the states' rights to the northern states that had chosen not to return people escaped from slavery. Over that issue, the government of the northern states, the federal government, chose to say, "We will not let you leave, we will fight a war for the Union." That later became a war for freedom of those enslaved, but it didn't succeed. Slavery remained in the Deep South by other names - in prison programs with charges over nothing and eternal debt that threatened every African-American in the South right up through World War II. And that was after killing three-quarters of a million people, destroying cities, and creating hostility that exists to this day over the the Confederate flag and the racism it symbolizes, all brewing out of bitterness over a war that didn't have to happen.

I can't say with certainty that slavery would have ended more quickly and more completely if the South had been allowed to leave and escaped former slaves had been allowed to remain free, and the North and the rest of the world had been a positive influence on the South. However, it's certainly a possibility that it would have ended sooner if the southern slave owners had agreed to a system of compensated emancipation and freed the slaves without a war and without secession, as most nations that ended slavery did. That absolutely would have been preferable to the Civil War as it happened. No other nation killed people the way the United States did to end slavery.

AG: Isn't there at least one exception - Haiti - which killed people to end slavery?

DS: Well, there was an uprising of primarily enslaved people on Haiti and that happened in Jamaica and numerous other places, but nations didn't split and have a civil war and kill three-quarters of a million people and then pass the legislation that they should have passed on day one to end slavery. That was not the norm. Most nations continued to exist as the same nation that had slavery and abolished it without a war.

AG: Okay, in both of your two essays on this, you say that it's anything but an easy moral question whether four million people should be left enslaved another moment, or whether a

nation should launch a war that might benefit them. However, with the US military might and its greenhouse gases threatening the future of life on Earth, is secession still a difficult moral choice?

DS: Well, we have to do something. If we think that we can somehow gain control of the US government, bring it under popular, enlightened progressive control, preserve a habitable climate, and rein in the dangers of nuclear and other warfare, then we should. However, if we think it's more likely that we can achieve those goals by secession, then we should go down that path. There's no question. It's an absolute moral imperative.

I think it's more likely that we can make positive changes happen on environment and military issues if states begin to secede. I don't think it's question of personal lifestyle preference or some sort of parochial identification with your state. I think it's an absolute moral demand that something be done to create a government with some power that can be controlled by the residents of its territory. That was supposedly the idea in creating the United States, but it doesn't exist now and we have to make it exist even if it's piece by piece, part of the United States at a time.

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