

# REFLECTIONS

## CALIFORNIA SECEDES!

Robert Silverberg

I have lived in California for nearly fifty years now. It's a very strange place. There's nothing else like it. It's vast, for one thing—the third largest state in the Union, behind Alaska and Texas, stretching along the Pacific Coast for nearly eight hundred miles from the Oregon border in the north to Mexico in the south and covering 163,000 square miles. It's by far the most populous, with 39.5 million people, many of whom, like me, have come there from someplace else. (I grew up in New York, which is, believe me, a very un-Californian place.) It has its own native plants and animals, found nowhere else. It has its own climate, quite different from the climates of the places that border it. In fact, it has a great many climates. Here in coastal California, where I live, summers are completely dry and the winters are rainy, and those winters are pretty much frost-free, so that we live among bright cascades of flowers in December and January while the rest of the country is being buried under blizzards. But just a little way east of the coastal strip things are much more extreme, so that it's possible to stand on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles on a 75-degree January day and look inland toward snow-covered mountains not very far away. Much of the state is formidable desert. Much of it is heavily forested, with the biggest trees in the world. Its Sierra Nevada mountain range, with some of the tallest peaks in the continental United States, is perpetually buried in snow. In its southern coastal region one can go to the beach every day of the year.

California, if it were a separate country, would have the fifth largest economy in the world, greater than those of France and the United Kingdom. Its gigantic film industry supplies the whole planet with entertainment. Silicon Valley, just south of where I live, is the world's technological capital. Most of the fruits and vegetables America eats come from the farms of California. A lot of the weirdest aspects of our culture come from here, too—psychedelic philosophers and serial killers and religious cults of every description. It's very, very different from the rest of the Union. And for most of its history, a substantial portion of its population has been trying to figure out a way to separate it from that Union. There's an active secession movement going on here right now, advocating what is called, in the inelegant modern jargon, Calexit.

Spoiler alert: it's not going to get anywhere.

There's nothing in the Constitution that permits states to secede from the Union. A bunch of them tried it in 1860, you may recall, and the Federal government was so displeased by that that we found ourselves in an ugly civil war lasting five years, at the end of which the secessionist states had suffered such damage that it took them decades to recover. The secessionists were attempting to preserve, among other things, their right to own slaves, which they saw as central to their way of life, and they were willing to form an army to defend that right. Today's secessionist Californians simply feel that they pay more than their fair share in taxes to the Federal government (it's estimated that California gets 78 cents in benefits from Washington for every tax dollar paid in, whereas Alabama, for example, gets \$1.66). That may be annoying, but most Californians don't see it as something to go to war over. A lot of Californians weren't happy with the outcome of the 2016 Presidential election, either, but the cooler heads here are aware that going to war to form a separate country is not the simplest way to effect regime change: there's another presidential election due to occur in a couple of years, and its results may well be more satisfying to

the majority of Californians than those of the last one.

The current Calexit movement isn't the first one that seeks to transform the place, by any means. California came into the Union as the thirty-first state, in 1850, and within five years the state legislature was debating a bill to split it into three states. That failed, as did another partition bill in 1859 that would have divided the state into southern and northern halves, and many others over the years. (A venture capitalist launched a scheme in 2013 to turn it into *six* states, which went nowhere, and a conservative group proposed in 2018 to separate California's rural counties from the more liberal urban ones. It, too, sank without a trace, but more of the same will be coming along.)

The really radical idea, that of becoming a separate country entirely, has also popped up from time to time. In 1976 Ernest Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia* suggested pulling the more environmentally enlightened parts of Northern California, Oregon, and Washington out of the United States to become an independent republic. The Cascadia independence movement, some years later, would have added Idaho and British Columbia to the new nation. The California National Party, founded in 2014, advocates the secession of all of California from the hopelessly unprogressive rest of the United States "by legal and peaceful means." And now we have the Calexit people circulating petitions of the same sort.

Will it happen, this time? I don't think so. The whole notion might be worthy of a science fiction story, but it really belongs, I think, in the realm of fantasy.

Aside from the fact that a lot of Californians are uneasy about losing their American citizenship, turning in their savings accounts for new California money, needing to have passports to visit nearby states, perhaps even having tariffs placed on goods imported from those other states, and so forth, it also is important to consider that significant chunks of California are Federal property—such things as Yosemite National Park and a slew of other national parks, Death Valley, the major part of our freeway system, a cluster of military bases, and a good deal more. It is not likely that Washington will stand idly by while we yank such things out of the Union; and the Federal government, unlike California, *does* have an army to enforce its wishes.

Nevertheless, our Calexiteers are hard at work raising support for secession (followed, I suppose, by the creation of our own currency and postage stamps, our application to join the United Nations as an independent country, the issuance of a California passport that we would have to show in order to get across the border into Nevada or Arizona, etc., etc.). In order for all this to happen peacefully, the United States would first have to hold a constitutional convention, which must be requested by two thirds of the states, thirty-four in all. Not much chance of that, because a constitutional convention has loose-cannon aspects that a good many of us find frightening: it would be free to address itself to whichever part of the present Constitution it cared to, not just the issue of Californian secession, and the result might be very startling. (Even so, a dozen states have already passed resolutions calling for such a convention, but I doubt that the plan will get much further than that.) Barring a convention, the next move would have to be an amendment to the present constitution permitting states to secede, passed by three quarters of the states, and, though a good many citizens of states more conservative than this one, weary of what they consider Californian insanity, would be happy to see us pick up and leave, it's highly unlikely that the amendment could win the votes of the necessary number of states, since it would be seen not just as a way of getting rid of those pesky Californians but as the first step in the breakup of the Union itself. Still, Calexit petitions have been drawn up, calling for Californians to express their opinions about secession. (Most of them are against it, it turns out, especially when a second proposal to carve out an "autonomous Native American nation" in eastern California is tacked onto it.) So the idea of an independent country of California is

likely to remain in the domain of fantasy fiction, I think.

If we do somehow manage to secede, though, I propose that we make ourselves not a republic but an empire. There's precedent for that. San Francisco once had its own emperor, Joshua Abraham Norton, who was born in England but came to California at the time of the Gold Rush to make his fortune. Which he did, not in gold but in rice, but he went bankrupt when the price of rice abruptly dropped through oversupply. That may have had some impact on his sanity—there is debate about that—but, anyway, in September 1859 he proclaimed himself Emperor of the United States and decked himself out in a regal uniform, and the citizens of San Francisco delightedly hailed him as their monarch, bowing to him in the streets and applauding his proclamations. Emperor Norton issued his own currency, which restaurants allowed him to use in paying his bills, and the imperial banknotes are sought-after collector's items today. When he died, in 1880, more than ten thousand people turned out for his funeral.

I used the imperial concept myself, in a story called "The Palace at Midnight" that I wrote in 1980. A century or so from now, there has been a disastrous world war (can there be any other kind?), and the United States has splintered into a thousand independent republics: Monterey, San Jose, Santa Cruz, and so on all the way down to San Diego, each a separate entity. But San Francisco, ever conscious of its special history, chooses to call itself an empire, and the current emperor, Norton VII, presides over his tiny realm from the San Francisco City Hall.

It's only a science fiction story. I didn't intend it as a serious prediction. But it has just about as much chance of becoming reality, I figure, as the current Calexit movement. This place where I live is a lively one, forever coming up with unusual ideas. Not necessarily good ideas, mark you. But definitely unusual.

It's a pity that such things as postage stamps will probably be obsolete by the time the Republic, or perhaps Empire, of California takes its seat in the United Nations sometime in the shiny digital future. I'd love to see some stamps with the portrait of Emperor Norton on them. Or the hundred-Norton bills that we would use to pay for our groceries; but paper money will be out of fashion too by then. I suppose we'll have to settle for some kind of blockchain currency here instead. We will, I hope, call it the Norton, at least.