

Book Review

Christopher F. Zurn: *Splitsville USA: A Democratic Argument for Breaking Up the United States*. (New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. xi, 215.)

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In the last fifty years America has endured a variety of political crises, from Vietnam to Watergate to the 9/11 attacks. While each of these events has produced its own unique set of national anxieties and political upheavals, none of them led to an appreciable slackening of our collective support of the Constitution. However, the 2016 presidential election has marked a unique loosening of traditional constraints on American politics and political thinking. The tradition-trampling presidency of Donald J. Trump has helped to foster an atmosphere of radical thinking nearer the center of American politics. Political propositions that were once the exclusive preserve of radicals and misfits, such as secession, are gradually becoming a part of the national discourse. For example, a secession movement has existed on the political margins in Texas since the 1990s, led by borderline personalities who engaged in a bloody standoff with law enforcement in 1997. By 2022, after two successive failed attempts, the Republican Party of Texas added a plank to their platform calling for a voter referendum on secession. When Republican Representative Marjorie Taylor Green of Georgia announced in February of 2023 it was time for a “national divorce,” separating the United States into two countries of uniformly red and blue states, many pundits took her pronouncement seriously. David French, in his book *Divided We Fall: America’s Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation* (St. Martin’s, 2020), argues this fervid political environment could lead to more serious proposals for secession, and outlines the dangers it poses to the security and prosperity of the United States. Into this worrying atmosphere enters Christopher F. Zurn’s *Splitsville USA*, a book that seeks national agreement “to euthanize our Constitution” and replace the United States with two or more new countries (196). Quoting another book in this growing secessionist genre, F. H. Buckley’s *American Secession* (Encounter Books, 2020), Zurn notes, “Since the Civil War, the idea of secession has been consigned to the political loony bin” (127). Despite the recent misgivings about the endurance of the union, there is little in Zurn’s examination to suggest that this should not continue to be the safest and most appropriate location for ideas such as Splitsville.

Splitsville is a metaphor for a breakup of the United States into new countries. Zurn argues in the opening two chapters that the United States no

longer has a shared “democratic precommitment” of respecting free and fair elections to determine political representation. This is both a symptom and a cause of a break with America’s commitment to democracy, that in his view will inexorably lead to an authoritarian future (3). He argues “the best way to save democracy” is a “peaceful, negotiated and mutual agreement to breakup” (4). The reasons for this drastic conclusion are structural and endemic to the Constitution. He claims that there are key democratic deficiencies of the Constitution that have helped lay the foundation for the declining precommitment of Americans to democracy: the Senate’s lack of apportionment, partisan redistricting, the Electoral College, and a partisan judiciary. Reform of all of these ills is unavailable to us due to the practical unamendability of the Constitution (30–31). Moreover, contemporary American politics is beset by a loss of democratic norms, partisan polarization, political disinformation, and a capture of the policymaking process by economic elites (35–36). Zurn argues that a breakup of the United States would yield political advantages primarily through reinvigorating our commitment to democracy. He claims establishing new countries would allow for a “reboot” of democracy, with smaller nations being more responsive to citizens, more cooperative, and less divided by competing interests (54). He finds all alternatives to the political dissolution of the union “unresponsive, unattractive, or unavailable” (71–95). Zurn outlines how a separation could be negotiated democratically and peacefully, such as via the convention clause of Article V of the Constitution, and gives an account of ways it could be achieved in chapter 5. He argues the political consensus of this mutual agreement could be generated through a concentration on “hot-button issues” that divide political parties, such as abortion, immigration, guns, race, and so on (128). Essentially, he posits our mutual political hatreds could somehow be channeled toward the constructive end of dividing the country into new and improved democratic nations.

In making many key arguments of the book, the author engages in repeated qualifying of what his argument for Splitsville is or is not, in an attempt to quell anticipated criticisms (52, 64). He claims Splitsville is not a “blueprint” but a “conversation opener” (10–11). However, this modesty is belied by the sureness by which he repeatedly and consistently recommends disunion. There is also a distracting habit of continually stating what will be argued in future, instead of making clear and connected arguments throughout. Perhaps the book’s greatest frailty is the lack of theoretical work in establishing a coherent theory of democracy to demonstrate how our Constitution falls so drastically short that secession is the only alternative to authoritarianism. It is not clear what the legitimate political conditions for secession ought to be, how his concept of democratic precommitment may be usefully applied in determining them, or how Zurn’s critique of US institutions can be tangibly used to determine a political threshold for secession. Any responsible argument for a maximal political decision, such as recommending the dissolution of the United States, surely requires a thorough theoretical account of

democracy, and the exact conditions upon which one should consider such a drastic, dangerous, and likely irrevocable step. Zurn has valid criticisms of American democracy, such as the unrepresentative nature of the Senate, the partisan distortions of gerrymandering, and the baneful effects of our polarized political environment. However, none of these separately or collectively are in the slightest degree convincing as pretexts for abandoning the Constitution. Moreover, Zurn has a naive assessment of the consequences and outcomes of secession. At several points he claims unpersuasively that disunion can likely be achieved without violence or widespread disorder, citing the examples of Brexit, Quebec, and the demise of the Soviet Union among others (7–10, 122–27). He also argues that most of the newly established countries that would result from his proposed break up would form the kind of democratic regimes he finds most compelling and legitimate, but is willing to lose one of them to authoritarianism to save the rest (158).

Thomas Jefferson, whom Zurn quotes admiringly in concluding the book, counseled in the Declaration of Independence that prudence dictates “that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes.” Given Zurn’s woefully inadequate criticisms of the Constitution’s democratic failings, it is impossible to see how pulling the constitutional roof down on our heads would be a desirable or commensurate solution. Fecklessness as a political mindset is becoming an increasingly dangerous aspect of our current political climate. For all the misgivings about how divergent economic interests, cultural differences, or constitutional rigidity could undermine the idea of American union, their various combinations have yet to effectively undermine it. Rather, the results of the many challenges to America’s nationhood have tended to strengthen the hold of political union on the hearts and minds of its citizens, and revealed the frailties of competing alternatives. The Civil War, the Great Depression, World War II, the Vietnam War are all trials that pushed America to its political limits. And through it all the union expanded, strengthened, and prospered. Rather than toying with secession, we would do well to remember how much the blessings of liberty and the security of our freedoms are inextricably tied to the Constitution, and to the political union it enables.

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