

Taking American Partition Seriously: Using Historical and Futures Thinking to Address Growing Calls for Breaking up the Union

Cory Wright-Maley

St. Mary's University, Canada

Cory.WrightMaley@stmu.ca

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1742-5537>



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ABSTRACT

The current assessment of the state of political division in the United States is foreboding. Americans are more divided than any time since the Civil War, leaving some to opine that these differences may be irreconcilable. This speculative analysis takes seriously as its point of departure the position of a growing number of American commentators and policy experts who argue that the United States exhibits many of the risk factors that could lead to another civil war. Some commentators have advocated breaking up the union to preempt this outcome. The critical analysis within this article draws upon historical analogies from states partitioned during the 20th century, such as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Palestine, and India. These comparisons are used to evaluate proposals for a geographical sundering of the United States into Red and Blue Americas. My analysis highlights how any kind of national dissolution, though appealing to some at first glance, would be more politically complex, demographically fraught, and possibly no less violent than the alternative of civil conflict.

KEYWORDS

United States; partition; civil war; political division; historical thinking; historical analogy; speculative futures

Introduction

This paper represents a speculative venture that is the product of curiosity and concern borne by the pandemic and the Capitol insurrection. In this exploration, I take seriously the claims of some commentators that the political reality of the United States is that of deep and growing partisan division (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Lelkes, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2014, 2019) and an even more significant gap in the belief in these divisions (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). Although some historians and commentators (e.g., Kreitner, 2020; Michel, 2020; Taylor, 2021) tend to believe an historic dissolution of the United States is far-fetched, others see it as a distinct, even inevitable possibility (Buckley, 2020). Further, many Americans support secessionist ideas (Barnes, 2021).

I argue further that social studies teachers, particularly in the United States, should take the issue of dissolution seriously through the lens of futures thinking, which seeks to equip people with the capacity to consider the downstream possibilities of current actions. Such exercises can be sobering indeed. I will draw from historical analogs (e.g., the Soviet Union, Balkans, Czechoslovakia, Palestine, and India-Pakistan) to critique some of the proposals for dissolution to highlight just how painful and contentious this process would be. As I conclude the article, I offer teachers practical suggestions for implementing such an inquiry.

Situating the Author

Although I am Canadian and live and work in the city of my birth, I find it challenging to discuss Americans as *them*. Instead, when I consider my relationship with Americans, I think of *we* and *us*. I was born and raised in Calgary until I ventured south to California to become a social studies teacher. I lived and taught in California before pursuing my Ph.D. in Connecticut. I lived in the United States continuously from the age of 22 until I was 35, except for two years spent elsewhere in the world. These years are foundational to who I am as a person, educator, and political observer. Today I am married to an American with whom I share the parentage of three children who are also American by birthright. Although there will likely be readers who dismiss my construal of this relationship as disingenuous or simply incorrect, it remains consistent with what we know about cosmopolitan identity development in which the self may become liberated from place. It is mediated instead by affective identifications (see Rahimi & Good, 2019). For me, America is an ideal that is as personal as political.

Why Should Social Studies Teachers Take Speculation Seriously?

Given the growing tensions and polarization of America today, social studies teachers need to be open to future possibilities that until recently seemed unimaginable. In this section, I draw from the NCSS (2016) Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies and C3 Framework (2013) to build the case for why social studies teachers should take this looming issue seriously. What I am *not* proposing is that teachers promote dissolving the United States. As one of my colleagues, Wayne Journell, pointed out, it would not be hard to imagine that becoming a sensational headline on Fox News or MSNBC (Personal Communication, March 9, 2022). That would indeed be regrettable. This thought experiment offers instead the opportunity for teachers to reconsider fundamental assumptions and narratives concerning a range of possible futures for the country. Failing to do so may lead people to suggest and even believe partition is a simple solution to America's political division problem.

As Kent den Heyer (2017) articulated in his work on future scenarios, students benefit from the agency inherent in making determinations about future possibilities and assessing their likelihood which works against student malaise and the weight of potentially frightening possibilities that may seem out of their control. Such work empowers students to rethink our contemporary assumptions and reimagine the present and future. Moreover, applying the analytical tools drawn from futures thinking—gathering and weighing evidence and diverse viewpoints, looking for causal forces, identifying analytical biases, working in collaboration, and revising previously held beliefs—are critical capacities all people should possess whether they are making decisions about changing careers or determinations about threats to national security (see Tetlock & Gardner, 2015).

Thomas G. Mahnken and A. Bradley Potter (2021) argued that futures thinking—which they define as a form of strategic thinking—is a vital capacity for the current century. They advocate:

hedging against several potential futures, each with plausible causal chains leading to their unfolding, offers the best way to make prognostication more productive. Meanwhile, the future has never been a neat extrapolation of the current moment, the underlying assumption of presentism. What we see happening now need not be the most important feature of what we witness later, and today is often a poor guide to tomorrow's specifics. In sum, flexibility, complexity, and contingency defined clever strategists' thinking (p. 124).

In this way, when inviting students to evaluate the causal probabilities related to partition versus unification or—more colloquially—divorce versus reconciliation, efforts toward reconciliation appear more practical and desirable. In turn, asking our students to assess possibilities for the future of the American republic requires our students to refocus on prevailing conditions and to seek out creative approaches to minimizing threats (e.g., political divisiveness) and maximizing opportunities.

Jeanne Leidtka (1998) argued that to think about future problems, students must take a systems perspective, be intent-driven or future-oriented, exercise flexibility in the face of changing conditions, engage in “thinking in time” that “connects past, present, and future,” and participate in hypothesis generation that is both critical and creative (p. 123). We need our students, perhaps more than ever, to know how to do this work profoundly and rigorously. What we are asking of students in playing through these thought experiments is to practice strategic thinking in the service of “civic competence [toward] the maintenance and enhancement of a free and democratic society” (NCSS, 2016, p. 180). Moreover, I hope that when we as teachers “address public problems individually and collaboratively” such as the thoughtless claim that it would be easier if progressive and conservative Americans just went their own ways, we reorient them toward the maintenance, strengthening, and improvement of national discourse (NCSS, 2013, p. 31).

The promotion of these capacities relies upon our willingness as social studies teachers to “focus on the social world as it is: its flaws, its strengths, its dangers, and its promise” (NCSS, 2016, p. 181) and to learn to deliberate over difficult questions on pressing issues of concern (NCSS, 2013), even if the topic is politically risky to engage in with students. Let us take this commitment to the maintenance and enhancement of democracy seriously. Students need opportunities to contend with the growing realities of illiberalism and anti-democratic sentiment in the United States (Bologna & Dearing, 2021) and to grapple with the extent to which these sentiments threaten the heart of the American project. They must also grapple with the desire to walk away from the United States and its unfulfilled promises and their manifold consequences internally (Graham, 2017) and internationally (Bessner, 2022).

More than learning and thinking about these realities and potentialities, NCSS (2016) asks us to help students “make reasoned decisions that include consideration of the values within alternative policy recommendations” and “to promote critical, creative, and ethical thinking on problems faced by citizens and leaders” (181-182). If dissolution is inevitable, we need our students to understand the fraught and complex national and international landscapes they will likely have to navigate as the country attempts to disentangle itself legislatively, legally, institutionally, economically, and culturally, not just geographically (Weiner, 2017). If we are instead to effectively meet calls for national reconciliation (e.g., Allen and West, 2021), we need our students to be equipped not only with the skills to engage these calls but also with the historical referents that are necessary to support the urgency of such calls for large-scale reconciliation projects. Our students should, however, consider that other possibilities for political, legal, or monetary forms of organization could exist that offer solutions that are preferable to either of these binary positions.

We Should Be Concerned

It should be concerning that national security experts and journalists alike have begun to take questions like, ‘Is the American republic as fragile as it seems?’ ‘Is national schism imminent?’ and ‘Is there a civil war on the horizon?’ seriously. Articles by Greg Jaffe (2019) and Jenna Johnson (2019), Stephen

Marche (2018, 2020), and Robin Wright (2017) brought the prospect of civil war into the fold of reputable mainstream, but not without critics who have tended to view these claims as melodramatic, dishonest, or self-fulfilling (e.g., Moyn, 2020; O'Toole, 2021). These critiques, though well-considered, have been neutered to an extent by more recent analyses by policy experts focused on civil conflicts, such as Barbara F. Walter (2022) and Monica Duffy Toft (2021), who have argued that all the conditions for civil violence are already in place, which left unchecked will ensure that “more violence is inevitable” (Toft, 2021, para. 15). Some, like journalist Kaia Hubbard (2021) have argued that the growing din secessionist rhetoric comes amid a backdrop of hyper-partisanship convincing Americans that “walking away is looking easier than coming together” (byline). This conviction now includes several members of Congress (Avalon, 2021).

This portentous situation should prompt us to ask: Is the United States of America at the precipice of a massive schism? If so, can the divide be healed or circumscribed? If it cannot, would an intentional decision to part ways be desirable, or at least necessary, to avoid the more tragic consequences of an open civil conflict? Moreover, what impact would such a dissolution have on the international order?

American Partition

Few Americans are likely to view civil war as a desirable outcome, even while a recent Zogby (2021) poll found that 46% of Americans “believed civil war was likely” (para. 1). And although some might revel viscerally at the prospect of casting off the other side of the political divide, a partition is more undesirable than one might casually glean. Still, it is more desirable than a war that could take the lives of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Americans. In the coming sections, I will present five historical scenarios from which we may begin to draw lessons regarding the partition of a country. The following sections map out scenarios that could be used as points of departure for students to reimagine possible futures for their country. They should be considered exploratory forays that can serve as invitations to further inquiry.

Scenario 1: Dissolution by Political Implosion

The first scenario is predicated on the assumption that the national government will eventually collapse under the weight of its dysfunction. Given its current trajectory, it is easy to imagine that this could occur. Federal agencies are brazenly filled with industry shells, traditional checks on power are being weakened or altogether eliminated, agency leadership is increasingly at odds with lifelong bureaucrats, and taxation policy continues to strip away the commonwealth to concentrate it in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals, and Congress does little for the American people except for fuel the animosity partisans feel toward each other.

It is difficult to know when or if this eventuality might arise, but it would leave all states with diminished capacity to foster thriving societies in the short to medium term regardless of what forms of association would emerge following a national implosion. This would likely be the most calamitous outcome for newly partitioned countries and regional—even global—military and human security. Few nations have separated amicably, particularly under duress.

Historical Antecedents

The Fall of the Soviet Union.

One could look to the fall of the Soviet Union as an example of a political union that dissolved when the central government collapsed. It is not a perfect analogy; the break-up of the Soviet bloc was not so much a partition but a series of secessions. Nevertheless, it is instructive of the ongoing challenges of this form of disunion. Lithuania declared its independence in early 1990, claiming its territory before Russia annexed it in 1940. When Moscow attacked the newly independent state, the United States threatened to withdraw its economic support to the flagging Soviet Union as it tried desperately to remain solvent. The Soviets were forced to concede the territory. Several months later, ten other Soviet Socialist Republics followed suit. This scenario closely resembles South Carolina's secession in December 1860, cascading into further secessions in the coming months. In the Soviet case—in contrast to the American one—Russia lacked the resources to sustain a conflict (Lektzian & Ragauskas, 2016).

The Breakup of Yugoslavia.

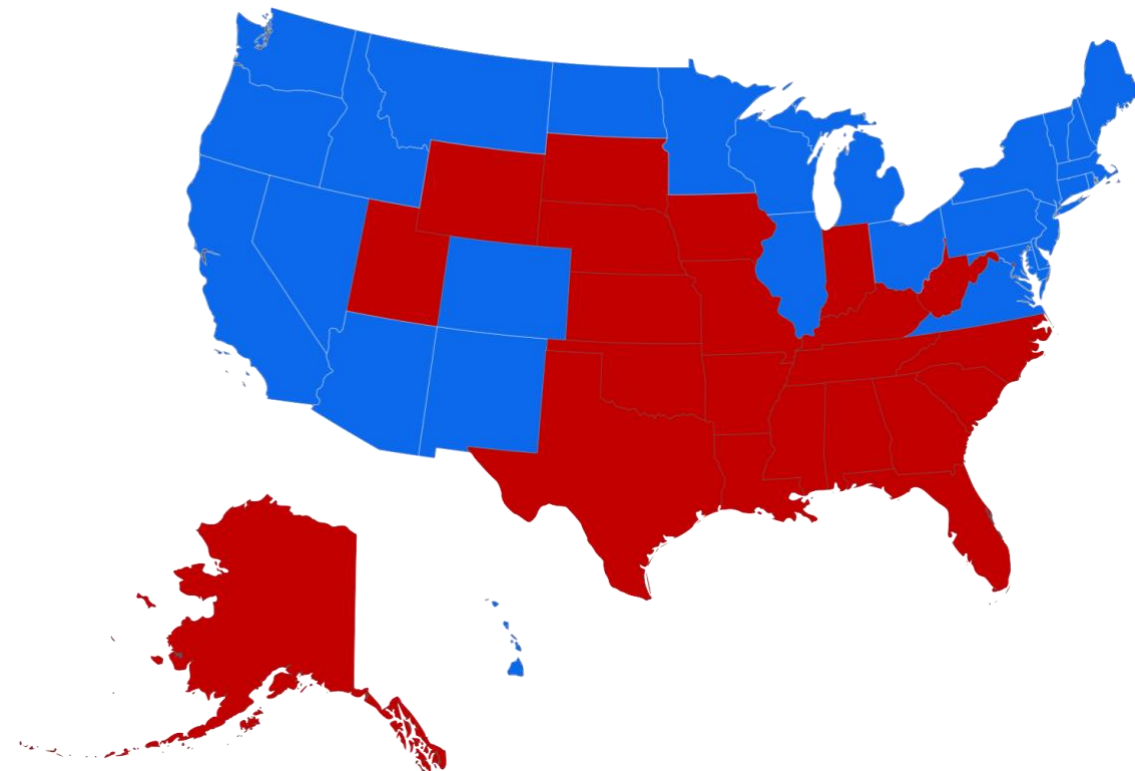
A similar and ultimately more tragic lesson can be derived from the collapse of the former Yugoslavia (Norris, 2008). Its first secessions by Slovenia and Croatia in the wake of the crumbling Soviet bloc led to a nearly decade-long war between the ethnically fragmented republics of the crumbling communist state. The conflict eventually ended through the intervention of a more powerful coalition force under the auspices of NATO, but not before the conflict devolved into a series of civilian atrocities. Leaders of the Serbian regime, the primary perpetrators of these atrocities, were charged with genocide and other crimes against humanity in Bosnia and Kosovo (Tatum, 2010). Of note, it was women and ethnic minorities, both Kosovar Albanians and Bosnian Muslims, who bore the brunt of these crimes.

All this is to say that the collapse scenario leading to the rapid dissolution of a once-mighty federalist state is possible, but one that is unlikely to end without bloodshed, much like the secession of the Baltics. There would likely be no such superpower to come to the rescue. This form of secession/dissolution leading to international recognition without protracted conflict seems far less likely than the bloodier Balkan scenario, especially given the multiethnic makeup of the United States today.

Scenario 2: Partition as a Blunt Tearing of the Union

Figure 1

Roughly Divided Map of Progressive and Conservative America



Note. This map was created by the author on amCharts. The construction of this map takes into consideration the four most recent presidential elections. The borders within the map are based on state boundaries. The author draws upon the work of Jesse Kelly (2018) which makes compromises to ensure the contiguity of the two nations and to avoid enclaves.

In a *Big Think* article, Frank Jacobs (2018) refers to a roughly hewn map created by Jesse Kelly (2018), which I have updated based on the electoral outcomes of the past four presidential cycles (see *270toWin*, 2022). There are a variety of maps such as these, in which the borderlines are drawn to have a very rough correlation to blue and red states, with some notable exceptions for contiguity that avoid creating enclave states. Problematically, this form of division results in many of the most staunchly liberal or conservative

districts being placed in a country that is anathema to their political stance (Kelly, 2018). Why? Because as Richard Kreitner (2020) pointed out that America's political fracturing occurs on an urban-rural divide, not along state lines.

In a partitioned America, one could easily imagine that many border communities could want to join one or the other America. This is to say nothing of African Americans, Latinos, Muslims, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ, or other visible minorities who could reasonably conclude that Red America—in which toxic right-wing populists have continually stoked the flames of White supremacist violence—could pose a graver threat to their liberty and security than Blue America. Evincing this, conservative states have typically resisted legislation like the Civil Rights and DREAM Acts and supported anti-Muslim legislation like the multiple iterations of Donald Trump's travel bans. Many have also actively implemented legislation and case law that targets the LGBTQ community (ALCU, 2023). Conversely, very conservative portions of the Pacific Northwest or the Rust Belt could view a newly independent liberally-inclined country that threatens the sanctity of several rights they currently enjoy, especially those encapsulated by the Constitution's Second Amendment. Alternatively, they may view rights protected by case law *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) as anathema to their values. These groups would find themselves as political minorities in newly politico-majoritarian countries; in other words, they would find themselves in the wrong countries.

It is unclear what the scope of these inevitable exoduses would be. What is clear is that there would have to be a coordinated effort to maintain order and orchestrate fluid resettlement plans. The logistics of these migrations alone would be nightmarish, given the vast gulfs in housing costs, dislocations of families, and the presence of jobs, to name only a few such challenges.

Historical Antecedents to Scenario 2

Colonial Border-Making in Africa.

The blunt partitions are reminiscent of the post-colonial borders imposed on African nations by Europeans, completed without consideration of the ethnic and linguistic characteristics of the peoples living there (Fisher, 2012). Such cartographical simplicities have led to several “human security problems, including widespread poverty, lack of infrastructure, limited education, and cross-border intergroup conflicts” (Gashaw, 2017, para. 7) and more significant wars, including the Nigerian Civil War in 1967-70, Eritrean-Ethiopian war in 1998-2000, and the two Sudanese Civil Wars from 1955-1972, and 1983-2005.

The Partition of India.

We might also look to the partition of India to illustrate the chaos likely to ensue from such a division that was internally decided upon. As India approached independence, there was growing concern from the minority Muslim populations that their rights would not be protected in a monolithic Indian state; they called for a two-state solution. The proposal was hurriedly developed as a late compromise to save what was quickly becoming a failed effort to reach a deal for independence from Britain. The rushed partition process breathed life into the eventual agreement for independence from Britain. However, the Radcliffe line—named after the British administrator who devised it—that divided the West Bengal province of India from East Pakistan was “a hastily and ignorantly drawn line” that had far-reaching and long-lasting consequences for the region (Chatterji, 1999, p. 242). The roughly construed borders, however, instigated mass migrations of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims beyond anyone's wildest expectations. These migrations displaced millions of refugees who had to be resettled, led to riots, and organized violence against migrating groups and minority populations who did not wish to migrate (Ansari, 2017). William Dalrymple's (2015) retrospective on the partition of India articulated the depth of the horrors that befell the people; he estimated a death toll of one to two million.

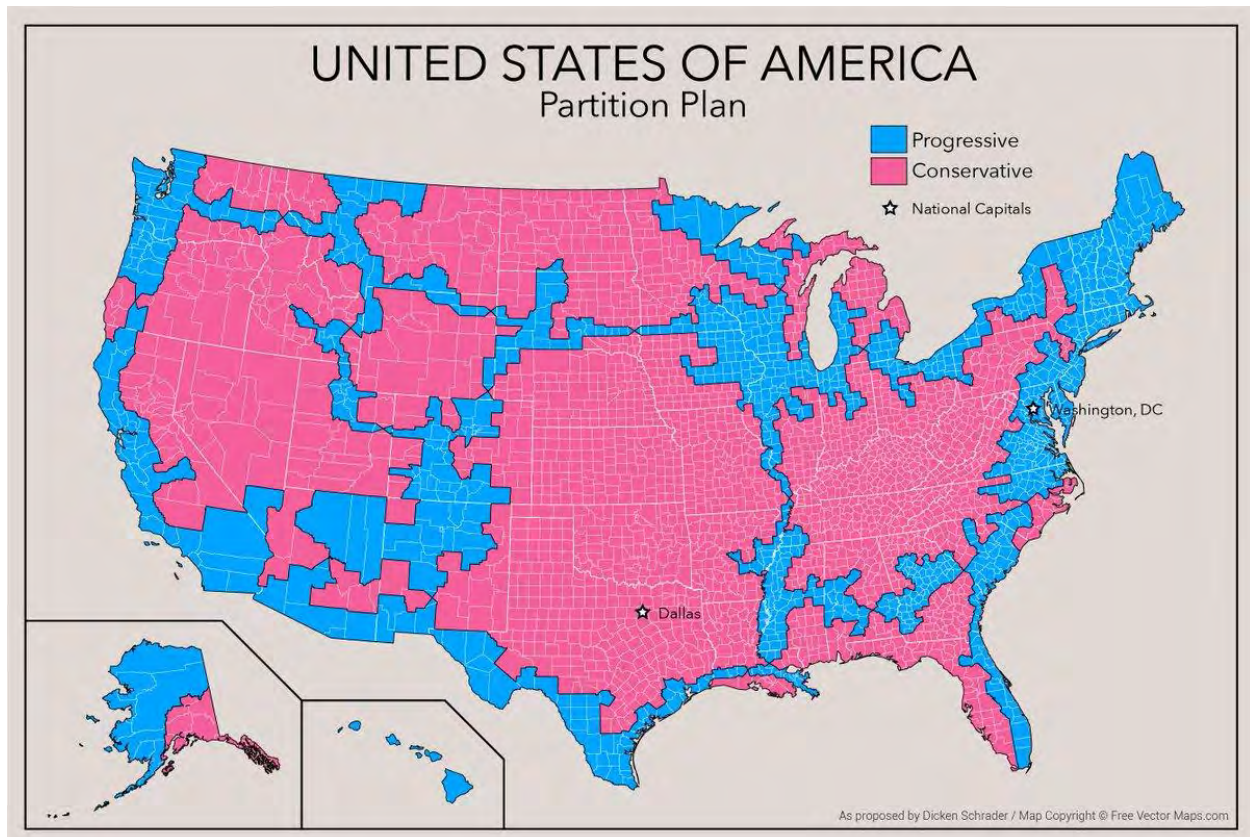
Parting the two Americas would necessitate a highly coordinated political and militarily protected migration to avoid the extensive violence that unfolded during India's partition. In 1948 the British were reticent to re-insert themselves into the politics of the newly formed states who had just declared themselves independent of the Empire. The two countries had not yet established unified national militaries in the

absence of the British (Dalrymple, 2015). As a result, there was little military stability that could be engaged to maintain order throughout the transition. Adding to this challenge are the uniquely high rates of gun ownership in the United States (see World Population Review, 2022). Even heavy military deployments could prove insufficient to maintain a peaceful and orderly transition. Partition undoubtedly contributed to the bellicose relationship between Pakistan and India, and one is left to wonder whether relations would have been different had migrations occurred under more peaceful circumstances.

Scenario 3: Bisected Dissolution

Figure 2

Partition Plan Map of the USA



Note. Dicken Schrader's county-level map is divided to include the vast majority of progressive and conservative districts in the "right" country. Enclaves are connected by interstate interchanges (i.e., they are not disconnected). Map can be found online (see Jacobs, 2018). Reprinted with permission.

Jacobs (2018) highlighted another proposition in the same article described in the previous section. The map, created by Dicken Schrader, is based upon the principles of the United Nations' 1947 plan to partition Palestine to create the state of Israel following WWII insofar as it would keep geographically isolated populations connected.

The general concept of this map is predicated upon bisecting the United States' political division as closely as possible. According to Schrader, the red and blue regions are resected according to county voting patterns. This bifurcation into contiguous, interlocking countries has a demographic logic inherent in its construction. Ernest A. Young (2015) pointed out that Americans have been self-segregating into politically more homogenous localities for nearly 30 years (see also Hess, 2009). Importantly for Schrader, all parts of each country are connected by interstate highway crossroads that could make for seamless transportation, even though the macro-level map looks like politically fractured archipelagos (Jacobs, 2018). It may help the reader to imagine a two-piece puzzle that can be slid together or apart; there are no discontinuities.

Unlike the roughly hewn map of Kelly's, Schrader's would help ensure many more Americans find themselves in the *correct* country for their political views.

Schrader's thoughtfully carved political lines seem, at first blush, to be an ideal compromise; after all, there are no enclaves/exclaves—think West Berlin during the Cold War or present-day Kaliningrad. Nevertheless, despite the scalpel-like nature of this bisection, more fine-grained analyses, such as those focused on city demographics, reveal partisan divisions at the community level within these counties (Young, 2015). This is to say there can be no clear dividing lines that save Americans from dislocation. Perhaps the most significant issue Schrader does not appear to consider is that the corridors might provoke confrontations and require heavier militarization to prevent partisan forays into one another's territories or necessitate demilitarization zones.

It would be naïve to suggest that a partition of American land in this way would be viewed favourably in a country where state or regional identities are salient to many—if not for most—Americans, even if those identities are more amorphous and resistant to definition than an American national identity (Young, 2015). Even if such a plan could be agreed upon, it would not be surprising to see instability become the status quo.

This scenario is fraught enough when we consider Republican and Democratic supporters monolithically, to say nothing of the vast intra-party differences within these two groups. Millions of individuals on the margins of their side of the political spectrum would have to decide which of two extremes would be most palatable. Is it better to be a centrist Republican in a homogenously blue nation than in a homogenously red nation? The obverse question is just as valid. For some, both would be unwelcoming polities, particularly given that they are also more likely to live along the borderlands of either of the two countries.

Historical Antecedent to Scenario 3

The Israel-Palestine Partition Plan.

The fact that the cartographic inspiration for this bisection comes from the Israel-Palestine partition plan should give readers pause. In 1947, the United Nations approved a partition plan to create the Jewish state of Israel (Bartal, 2018). The plan was adopted despite the vociferous objections of the Arab League, who had for decades resisted—sometimes violently—the creation of a Jewish state in lands they considered to be theirs (Pappe, 2007). In many ways, this partition should serve as a cautionary tale rather than a source of inspiration. Like the Schrader map, the 1947 plan was focused on demographics but created—from the Jewish point of view—a virtually indefensible border. For the Palestinians, it precipitated a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against them as Zionists mobilized between March and May of 1948 to clear their allotted territory of Arab peoples (Pappe, 2007).

When Israel declared independence, the Arab nations struck back the following day. The subsequent conflict displaced upwards of 800,000 Palestinian people (Ibish, 2018), continuing and exacerbating three decades of settler-colonial violence against the Palestinian people (Khalidi, 2020); their property and land were deemed abandoned by Israeli authorities, making them free to be settled by Jewish emigres, even though many Palestinian wished to return to their homes at the cessation of violence (United Nations, 1980). Since then, Palestine and Israel have been in a nearly continuous state of conflict over boundaries and territories delineated by the 1947 treaty. There is no end in sight to the conflict.

Scenario 4: The Amicable Dissolution

This scenario represents an amicable parting of ways in which political interests work peacefully to create two or more countries from the formerly united one, working through the logistics of the partition without violence. This is the best-case scenario for an American partition but also the least likely in a country where people cannot even divide up toilet paper without exchanging blows (Berube, 2021; Hermes & Kopitz, 2022). In contrast to examples of amicable dissolution discussed below, the cultural divides are not

geographically or historically distinct enough to make the split painless for either political group. As such, an amicable separation would be grievously tricky—if not impossible—to achieve.

Historical Antecedents to Scenario 4

The Velvet Divorce.

Perhaps the most satisfying example of partition is the devolution of the Czechoslovakian state, often referred to as the Velvet Divorce. Following the 1992 elections of Vaclav Klaus and Vladimir Meciar as the Prime Ministers (think Governors) of the Bohemian and Slovakian states, respectively, it soon became clear that the political union between the Czechs and Slovaks would be a difficult one. They disagreed on several fundamental policies and the government's role in managing the economic transition outside the Soviet sphere of influence (Wilde, 2019).

Robert K. Schaeffer (2019) described in his book *Severed States: Dilemmas for Democracy in a Divided World* that for Klaus in Bohemia, there was strong support for free-market reforms and for stemming the tide of resources flowing from Bohemia to the poorer state of Slovakia. In contrast, Meciar came to power by resisting these proposed reforms. Slovakia had benefited disproportionately from Soviet support, so many Slovaks saw the Klausian reforms as a threat to their wellbeing.

Meanwhile, President Vaclav Havel and most of the Czech and Slovak peoples opposed partition. Despite this majority sentiment, Havel could not organize sufficient support to resist the movement toward separation; he resigned in July 1992. Following his resignation, Meciar and Klaus negotiated a separation agreement that came into force on January 1, 1993, without enmity or violence.

Brexit.

The British exit from the European Union offers another example to draw insight into the complexities of extracting one political entity from another (Weiner, 2017). However, it is not a perfect comparator, given that the European Union is not a Federalist entity like the United States. Furthermore, unlike the states, the United Kingdom functioned as a fully integrated country with a legal system, governmental administration, currency, etc., that American states lack.

Scenario 5: Dissolution Across Ethnic or Cultural Lines

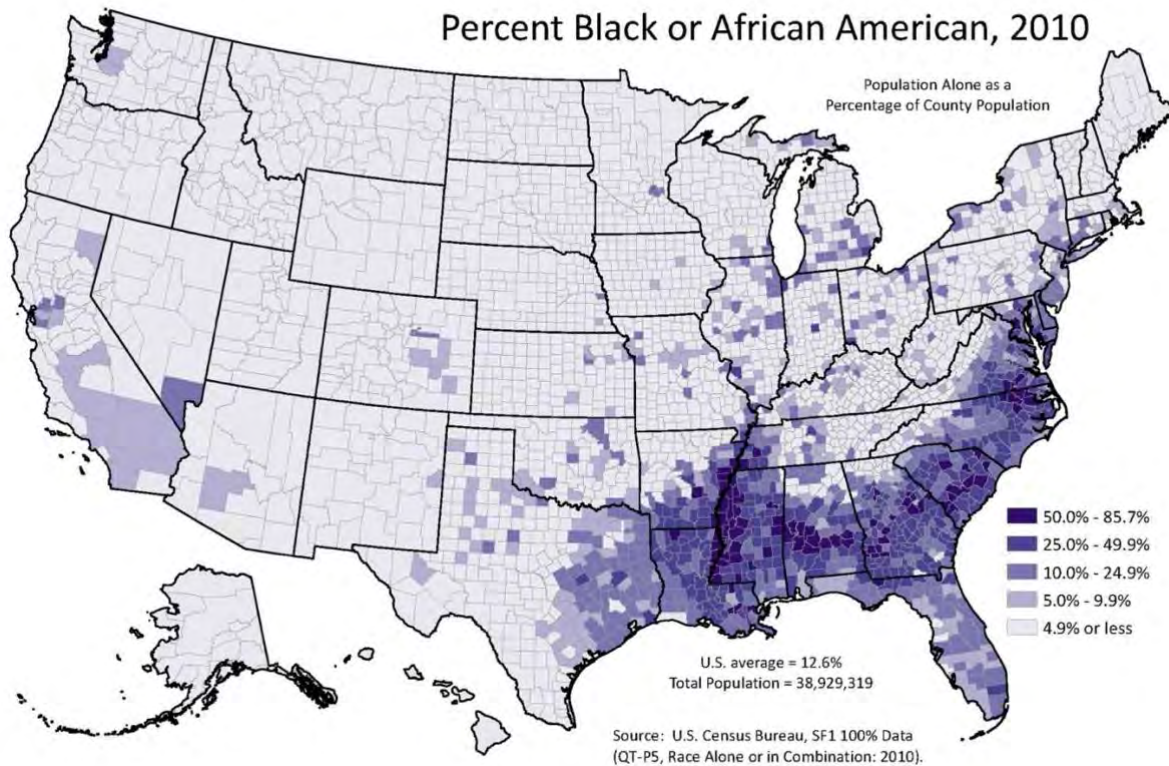
An important question frequently ignored in thinking about secessionism is the extent to which the seceding political unit is subject to further secessions. There is little reason to think that in the context of a dissolving United States that regional or ethnic blocs would not desire or attempt to establish new national boundaries not contemplated by those thinking only about the political divide.

Texit

There may be little reason to think Texas would join anyone. Already today, the pall of Texan independence, or *Texit* as it is being called, hangs over Texas state politics (Evelyn, 2021; Rai, 2021). The current legal precedent precludes the right to secession (*Texas v. White*, 1869), with even very conservative legal minds like Antonin Scalia (2006) rejecting the legality of such a notion. However, in a partitioned scenario, it seems likely that the state's independence from other states is a more likely scenario than not.

As the 10th largest economy in the world, the state has significant economic advantages, including oil reserves, diverse economic drivers from wine to manufacturing, and total energy independence (John, 2019)—though the disastrous winter storm in February of 2021 may call this last affordance into question (Kraus et al., 2021). It would not take much more than a rough calculation for Texans to recognize that neighboring states would only serve to drain its fiscal heft (see Gordon, 2021). These economic realities and Texan's fierce state-oriented identity all serve as factors that indicate Texas might be more likely to go its own way if the United States breaks up.

African American Nationhood

Figure 3*Map of the American Black Belt*

Note. By Jon T. Kilpinen (2014). Percent Black or African American, 2010. *ValpoScholar*. <https://scholar.valpo.edu/usmaps/9/>. This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

For most African Americans, there is *no* America where they are truly safe and free (e.g., Abdur-Rahman, 2019; León, 2017). The U.S. was built by African American blood, sweat, and tears; it has not paid its debts to them (Munford, 1996). They suffer the daily indignities of colonialism, White supremacy, racism, discrimination, and inequalities, of both personal and institutional varieties (see Dei, 2017, 2018). They are subject to state-sponsored violence under the auspices of policing in every state in the Union¹. There is, therefore, every reason to question White Americans' assumptions about where African Americans would choose to live in a partitioned America. Some might participate in a mass migration toward the lesser of two oppressive Americas. However, it is also possible that many African Americans look for inspiration from the Black nationalisms of the past (Robinson, 2001) or the growing popularity of Afrofuturism in the present (Lavender, 2019) and seek independent nationhood within the continental United States.

Further, it would be easy to understand that African Americans, rooted here generationally with communities forged by adversity, would find it unappealing to give up hard-earned gains or to abandon

¹ The terms Black and African American, though sometimes used interchangeably, are contested identities. For the sake of clarity in this article, I use the term African American to refer to individuals, communities, and ideas whose identities are forged in and with the United States. Whereas Black is a more encompassing term, including African Americans, but extends to individuals, communities, and ideas that may not identify with or be forged by the United States (see McDonald, 2021).

cohesive communities to live elsewhere. It would not, therefore, be surprising to see African Americans reach toward a more hopeful future in which they had greater political agency over their destinies.

Indigenous Independence(s)

Indigenous peoples in America, too, would have legitimate cause for secession from either of the partitioned states of America. Many nations have claims to lands dating back to time immemorial. Some, like the Siksikaitisitapi or Haudenosaunee peoples (more widely known as the Blackfoot and Iroquois Confederacies, respectively), might seek to consolidate their ancestral territories by withdrawing their U.S.-based lands from the two Americas, joining with their brethren in Canada, or by claiming independence from both countries. The Haudenosaunee carry with them the oldest living democracy and, like many Indigenous nations, have a long list of historical grievances from which to draw to justify forging their path if the United States begins to break apart (Cornblatt, 2008). The continued poisoning of their lands and waters, particularly lakes Erie and Onondaga, as well as the United States’ unwillingness to honor land rights treaties negotiated by George Washington himself in 1794, make them a likely candidate to secede from whichever America(s) their lands would end up belonging to (Onondaga Nation, 2012; see also Kimmerer, 2013).

Figure 4

Map of North American Indigenous Linguistic Groups



Note. Indigenous linguistic groups map provides a general sense of territorial boundaries. For more specific territorial boundaries see <http://native-land.ca>. From Kairos Canada (2015). Territorial Acknowledgment as an act of reconciliation. <https://www.kairoscanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/map.jpg>. Reprinted with permission.

Other Indigenous peoples, too, might seek to remain autonomous or forge agreements of solidarity with like-minded Indigenous nations to consolidate or recover ancestral lands stripped from their peoples over the last few centuries. For example, are the Sioux and Arapaho Nations whose treaty claims to the Black Hills, as outlined in the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, remain unfulfilled (Klapper, 1904; see also Cutlip, 2018), and may wish to reclaim those lands either as part of one of the Americas or as part of an independent Confederation. Efforts by Indigenous peoples to enforce Treaty rights and sovereignty over lands that are currently theirs already have precedence. Recently, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the *McGirt v. Oklahoma* (2019) decision that much of eastern Oklahoma belongs, in fact, and law, to the Creek, Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Seminoles who were driven out of their ancestral lands in what is now the American Southeast (p. 2).

The diverse experiences and circumstances of Indigenous peoples in the United States make it difficult to predict what paths independent or confederated peoples might choose. It is clear that when it comes to Indigenous nationalism, sovereignty, identity, and land cannot be disentangled (Polandri, 2016). This fact will inevitably complicate any plan to partition the United States.

Historical Antecedents to Scenario 5

This issue of divisibility has been raised in two of the United States' closest allies' separation challenges, Canada and the United Kingdom. In 1995, Quebec held a referendum to determine whether the province should separate from Canada to become a country unto itself. Its leaders, notably Lucien Bouchard, argued that although Canada was divisible, Quebec was not. The Indigenous Cree nations begged to differ. Jean Charest—himself native to Quebec and the leader of Canada's official opposition, was not sympathetic to separatism—agreed with the Cree and added that Quebec's Inuit and Innu peoples would also have a case to become independent of Quebec, should it choose to leave Canada (Langan, 1996).

More recently, the success of the Brexit vote and the lengthy negotiation process has led to a British separation from the European Union. This has, however, given rise to the question of Scottish independence and the slimmer possibility of Irish reunification. In contrast to Bouchard's claim, Prime Minister David Cameron tilted his cap toward the will of the people in those regions (Rachman, 2014). As recently as 2020, the Scottish Parliament was considering another referendum, only to shelve it owing to the COVID-19 pandemic (Lane, 2020).

The Scottish and Québécois cases offer two recent examples demonstrating the complexity of state dissolutions that could lead to cascading secessions. I raise this issue because there is an excellent case to be made for further secessions based on the legal and historical contexts.

The Complexity of Brass Tacks

The question regarding whether partition is a good idea and how it should occur if it comes to pass only becomes more complicated as you begin to consider the multiple futures and directions of travel that will unfold. Including questions of military, economic, and environmental security. In this section, I will highlight in broad strokes just a few such considerations.

Military Security

What should become of the military—its bases, construction yards, astronomical infrastructure, and nuclear arsenal? There remain related questions about how the military would be utilized during and after the transition. How should it be divided among the new countries? These internal practical questions are myriad and have security implications beyond their present borders. Some Canadian analysts are alarmed at the rise in secessionist sentiment in the U.S. because of what it may mean for Canadian national security (Homer-Dixon, 2022). Mexico, too, would likely be challenged in its efforts to address the many current border concerns of two or more northern counterparts.

Dissolution would also likely have far-reaching impacts, particularly for U.S. allies such as Ukraine, Taiwan, and South Korea, relying upon American military support for their security. On the whole, however,

critics of U.S. international adventurism and projections of power, like David Bessner (2022), argue that the removal of American military might is likelier to be good for the world than bad both because of the destabilizing impacts these interventions have had and because the world's most pressing problems require multilateral and non-military interventions.

Economic Security

Economic concerns would undoubtedly factor into the calculus of a negotiated dissolution. How would the current national debt be apportioned? Would it be dissolved entirely? How would you help ensure food security for the partitioned states of America? Much of the grazing and crop lands would likely fall into a Red America, even while most of the population would live in the highly urbanized and economically dominant Blue America. This disparity is likely exacerbated further if Texas declines to sign onto a unified Red America.

To this point, economic growth within Democratic congressional districts has outpaced Republican congressional districts by a large margin (Muro & Whiton, 2019). In fact, without Texas, it is entirely possible that Red America's economy, dominated by manufacturing, agriculture, and resource sectors—and without the social redistribution characteristic of the Canadian system—could more closely resemble Mexico's than the U.S. economy in aggregate today.

On the other hand, once stabilized, Red America might be viewed as a more reliable place to hold supply chains than China, but only if trust could be built between the two nations. Even so, although the economic policies that are hallmarks of many red states, such as depressed wages and limited working rights coupled with low personal and corporate tax rates, could potentially promote onshoring, these policies are currently subsidized by the federal transfer system. Without the buoying effect of federal transfers, Red America might find itself insolvent without changing its policies or drastically reducing the living standards its middle class currently enjoys (Gordon, 2021). These policies could also make trading with Blue America more difficult, given the standards the United States currently demands of most trading partners (Ford, 2021).

Environmental Security

Climate change, too, will likely impact the two countries unevenly. Hurricanes, drought, flooding, and other severe weather will disproportionately impact states likely to fall into Red America. These states are also currently among the least prepared to mitigate the effects of climate change (Latshaw, Links, & McKillop, 2020). Much of the South, particularly the Gulf Coast, Southeast, Oklahoma, and inland Texas, are at high risk for climate-based disasters, including the spread of "vector-borne diseases" such as the Zika virus, West Nile virus, and even malaria (para. 3).

Although the Western states are considered more well-prepared to mitigate the coming challenges than their counterparts in the American South (see Climate Central & ICF International, 2015), the West will be disproportionately impacted by wildfires (Borunda, 2020; C2ES, n.d.; Migliozi et al., 2020). Taken as a whole, however, a Blue America is likely to have the greater political will to mitigate these threats and the financial means to absorb the costs of such mitigations and disasters more effectively than a Red America would, further exacerbating the likely environmental threats to the two nations.

Conclusion

As I come to the closing of what began as a thought exercise, I am struck by how easy it is to conclude that a kind of amicable dissolution would make the problems of a politically fractured republic disappear. Indeed, many of the intractable political challenges today would be readily resolved by doing so. Nevertheless, the immeasurable complexity of any possibilities explored here is also sobering. The disruption of partition would be enormously painful. It must be considered against the status quo where the United States is rife with political division, strife, and gridlock, which are also enormously painful. Any of these forms of dissolution would likely foment decades of strife for individuals, families, and communities as

they wrestled with new and divided loyalties, resettled into new geographies, (re-)established cultures, sowed the seeds of economic stability, re-storied histories, reconstituted governance, and made sense of a new reality or contested realities. Any of these challenges could be sources of post-traumatic suffering or growth. It is, however, difficult to discern in the present, which is more likely to be predominant.

Suffice it to say, whether political reconciliation is possible or desirable depends wholly on Americans' willingness to expend much effort. Decades of hurt caused by colonialism, slavery, racial violence, and injustice wrapped in a context of growing economic inequality, media fragmentation, climate chaos, and cultural and economic dislocation in a globalizing world make such reconciliation anything but assured. If Americans are not up to that task, it may be that a policy of conscientious dissolution is preferable to a future that is more of the same for America.

Futures are always contingent, and we now have the opportunity as social studies teachers and teacher educators to engage our students in the process of futures thinking. When we ask students to consider, debate, and map the cascading consequences of their proposals, they are likelier to understand the gravity of the situation facing American democracy. To do this, students need to practice future-thinking skills that emphasize breaking problems into pieces, hypothesis-making, evaluating and weighting evidence appropriately, having their proposals and tentative conclusions challenged and prodded for errant thinking while doing the same for others, looking for alternative perspectives in the past and present, and exhibiting flexible and responsive thinking when their ideas do not hold up to scrutiny (Tetlock, 2016). To employ these skills, decision mapping—a mind-mapping technique—can help students visually represent their thinking about cascading effects in their proposed scenarios. This depiction and their presentation of their thinking provide multiple points of entry for the teacher or peers to question their assumptions, offer alternative explanations, provide competing sources of evidence, and provide additional input to help refine their ideas. It is an iterative process through which students ought to be able to provide multiple, even competing, scenarios that hold up to scrutiny.

The point of such activities is to engage students in the rigorous act of futures thinking and to position them to consider the future or futures in front of them more thoughtfully. Through the process of futures thinking, students are likelier to view the future with healthier skepticism while also recognizing that contingencies allow multiple possible futures to unfold and to envision what those are with greater accuracy.

As possible outcomes of these practices, students may recognize the difficulty of maintaining the American as untenable or could view the alternatives as too costly. The former could lead students to recognize that the American experiment has failed to seek alternatives to unionism. The latter could serve as the diagnosis disposing American students to start a healing process toward a more hopeful unionist future. Either way, social studies teachers ought to provide their students with the tools to evaluate possible futures in robust ways so that they do not walk blindly into them.

As Kent den Heyer (2017) points out, social studies all too often leave the future alone and thus “abandons students to a further sense of a deeply distressed present” (p. 8). We must, he argued, be deliberate in providing students with the opportunities to engage in “creativity and desirous imaginings animated by the study of future possibilities” and “to distinguish between probable and preferable futures,” which “provides students practice with articulating their ethical commitments as agents of future social life” (p. 9). In short, den Heyer articulated the need for teachers to recognize how our attendance to the future matters. His emphasis on providing students with the means to evaluate scenarios, as I am proposing here, is meant to orient them away from futures that are taken for granted and outside of the control of the current generation. The future is constantly in flux and contingent upon the generations of people inhabiting the present.

Likewise, Sioux scholar Nick Estes (2019) emphasized how a future orientation matters in education. He explained that “Indigenous notions of time...there is no separation between past and present, meaning that an alternative future is also determined by our understanding of the past. Our history is the future” (p.14). Indeed, these notions of temporality, in which past, present, and future are interactive and

malleable, challenge settler-colonial notions of time as fixed and unidirectional (Rifkin, 2017). However, by engaging in Indigenous ways of knowing the past, present, and future as a form of revelation or means of garnering insight into the present (e.g., Wagamese, 2019; Yunkaporta, 2020), we empower students with tools and practices for the times in which we live, and visions of what must be done to get free” (Estes, 2019, p. 14) from the democratic tragedy that looms large before us.

Peter T. Coleman (2022), Director of Columbia University’s Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict and Complexity, affirmed that a sufficiently frustrated group of citizens concerned with the status quo and whose lives have been rocked by disruption could “pivot for the better” if only they can “see a hopeful alternative path away from blame and battle that is feasible and not too costly; one they can imagine themselves taking” (paras. 10, 13). This moment of inflection reminds me of the story of the seven fires of the Anishinaabe people (Benton-Banai, 1988). In it, Edward Benton-Banai described a time of the seventh fire where the peoples of the world must choose to continue down the path of ruin or change their ways to create the world anew and to light the eighth and final fire, a time of coming together for humanity. We may be standing at this unique inflection point to which the Anishinaabe peoples refer. As social studies teachers, we are uniquely positioned to help provide our students with the tools to evaluate their futures in the present. To do so, however, requires a conscious and conscientious effort to orient our students to the work of “futures thinking” and to do “better than just falling forward” (den Heyer, 2017, p. 5). I hope this thought experiment provides one such opportunity to evaluate the complexities of this issue and serves to challenge the flippant way that some people propose the dissolution of the United States.

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