

How to Secede without Even Trying

By Maurice Carter in *The Covington News* – December 30, 2012

As we careen toward the so-called “fiscal cliff,” the collective yawn of Americans speaks volumes about the degree to which we’ve come to accept the dysfunction and gridlock of our political system in Washington. No one expects bipartisan cooperation to save the day. And, the political players are focused more on deflecting blame and surviving the fall than they are on how to avert it.

Of course, expectations could hardly sink lower than they already have. The most recent annual public opinion poll published in December by Indiana University’s Center on Congress found only nine percent of those surveyed approved of the job done by the 112th Congress. Factor in the 3.5% margin of error, and Washington is fast approaching a statistical goose egg. Come to think of it, I couldn’t find nine people – much less 9% of 300 million – who would give Congress a thumbs up right now.

Then, there’s the matter of petitions filed from all 50 states on the White House’s “We the People” web site seeking to secede from the Union. It’s easy to write those off as stunts by a disgruntled minority, but eight states (Georgia among them) passed the threshold of 25,000 signatures in 30 days. That’s the criteria for determining when a petition will receive a White House response. There’s no legal basis to secede from the Union, but this could still get interesting.

What does it all mean? How did we get here? And, what hope do we have of ever getting back to a better place as a nation?

These are not times we’d put forth as the embodiment of our motto, *E Pluribus Unum* – “from many, one.” In fact, you’d be justified to remove “United” from our national title, or at least to lower case the U.

As I ponder how we got here, I come back to an idea that’s been nagging at me for a while... We live in the age of extreme personalization. Most of the technological advancements of our lifetime have been on the trajectory of ever-increasing product flexibility, with the singular aim of giving each of us maximum ability to personalize our unique life experience.

Less than 100 years ago, Henry Ford said of the Model T: “Any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants, so long as it is black.” Contrast that to the innovations of the ensuing century, which brought us a host of devices – computers, cell phones, tablets, and video/music players – all uniquely personal and infinitely customized to the individual.

With satellite and internet radio, thousands of cable TV channels, video on demand, and all the movies and music ever produced anywhere in the world ever a click away, we each have total control over what we enjoy when. Some of us were born into a world with one TV set, three TV channels, and a handful of static-filled AM radio stations. In fact, some of us lived before there was TV.

One digital media provider today sells their service in ads featuring the tortured existence of a poor family living in bondage to a cable TV system that doesn't allow each family member to record all his or her preferred programs. God forbid we have to... er... compromise! Working things out fairly and equitably through dialog and negotiation, that's for suckers not blessed with the right technology.

And, there's the problem. Technology can give everyone his or her own music channel, video library, internet news feed, or personalized shopping site. But, technology cannot give each American his or her own government.

Government is compromise. What makes our American democratic experiment so audacious and so uniquely beautiful is the value we place on individual liberties and the preposterous notion that we can each be guaranteed the pursuit of happiness. It's a great ideal, but my happiness and yours can never coexist fully without collisions. Maybe I'm most happy blaring loud music on my patio at 3 AM, while you're happy in silent slumber. Perhaps universal health care available to all makes me happy, while it causes you great angst. We have to compromise.

But, compromise is so 20th Century. We've evolved beyond that. When you can't get your music on the family stereo, you retreat to your iPod and headphones. Can't settle on what TV program to watch? Slip away with your tablet. Can't agree on how to set and fund government priorities to balance a budget? Secede to...

Well, we haven't evolved that part yet.