I Introduction

1 Introduction

This book investigates secession. It seeks to answer a single question: why do groups decide to secede? Since secession is frequently a contested subject, it may be helpful at the outset to clarify both its meaning and my approach. Secession is the formal withdrawal from an established, internationally recognized state by a constituent unit to create a new sovereign state. The decision to secede represents an instance of political disintegration, when the citizens of a sub-system withdraw their political activities from the central government to focus them on a centre of their own. When the leaders of both a seceding community and the state express their positions in stark, absolute terms, the avenue of compromise is often precluded, thereby causing secessionist conflicts to be among the most bitter of struggles. To the observer, secession often appears irrational as it entails the ostensible sacrifice of economic opportunities and the endurance of social upheaval. Because of the coercive powers which the state can employ in these disputes, secessionist struggles frequently become violent and protracted, as both the seceding community and the state lose the willingness to accommodate each other's needs. Thus, secession is disintegrative in the most fundamental sense: it involves not the overthrow of existing government institutions, but rather the territorial dismemberment of a state. In this book, I refer to the groups attempting secession as "distinct communities."

The fact that secession seems to plague all types of societies – liberal democratic, former communist, and developing – implies the possible existence of many different routes to secession. The structured comparative study of numerous examples of secession and separatist agitation provides a broad perspective and enables the reformulation of the idiosyncratic motivations of each case into more general

variables. I propose that the timing of the decision to secede can be understood within a framework structured around four primary variables: (1) the benefits of continued membership in the larger existing political entity;[1] (2) the costs of such membership; (3) the costs of secession; and (4) the benefits of secession. Some costs and benefits are clearly qualitative; others are extremely difficult or even impossible to quantify. To have impact, though, all must be perceived by the distinct community. A fluctuating phenomenon such as secession, however, cannot be explained by a constant, such as the four costs and benefits taken as static conditions. Secessions arise only when the distinct community determines that there has been a shift in the balance of these four variables. The types of changes the distinct community so identifies occur at both the level of the state and the international system. These changes include both rapidly moving events, such as a sequence of political or economic initiatives, and gradual transformations of attitudes, such as mounting discrimination or growing tolerance of diversity.

Secession, by its very nature, raises the basic question of justification. The perceived justice of the secessionist cause colors the opinions and potential support of members of the distinct community itself, the central government, foreign governments, and the broader international community. After a good deal of consideration, it seems to me that a community embarking upon secession has already assumed a moral right to secede. Therefore, since the book investigates secession crises, it will not delve deeply into the arguments regarding when secession would be morally justifiable or even desirable.[2] Rather, the book builds on the foundation of an existing body of arguments specifying and circumscribing the conditions under which there may be a "right" of secession in order to focus on exploring and explaining the timing of the secession decision. What is most important for the study of the dynamic of secession is not a resolution to this

[1] For the sake of brevity, the book will use "the benefits of membership" for those benefits associated with the distinct community's continued membership within the larger state. The same description applies to the "costs of membership."

[2] For a detailed discussion of the moral justifications for secession, see John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works* vol. XIX (London, 1963), p. 549; Harry Beran, "A Liberal Theory of Secession," *Political Studies* (1984), Vol. XXXII, pp. 21–31; Allen Buchanan, *Secession: The Morality of Political Divorce From Fort Sumter to Lithuania and Quebec* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1991); Lee Buchheit, *Secession: The Legitimacy of Self-Determination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Michael Walzer, "The Reform of the International System" in Oyvind Osterud (ed.), *Studies of War and Peace* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986), p. 238.

ethical debate, but rather an understanding that the debate exists and will persist with each new secession crisis.

The book's focus is deliberately limited to the origins of secession, to explain why discontent leads to secession at certain times and to political demands short of separation under other circumstances. In other words, it focuses on a single "snapshot" in a set of rapidly changing events. Critical to understanding the snapshot, however, is an observation of the entire moving picture. The investigation of case studies spanning the period from the first stirrings of discontent to the outcomes of confrontation is crucial in order to place the moment of decision to secede in its proper context. Furthermore, in seeking to isolate the various constraints on the crucial decision, the book consistently comments on numerous intrinsic aspects of the state. The many differentiated routes to secession, to a certain extent, reflect changing conceptions of sovereignty and the state itself.

The argument rests on inferring the causes of secession decisions. A brief note on causality is necessary: discriminating analysis of historical documents such as the memoranda of secessionist organizations and autobiographies of their leaders paints only an incomplete picture of the dynamic of secession. Leaders cannot instigate a crisis without mass support. Due to the often diffuse nature of disaffection with the ruling regime among members of the community, their motivations for protest and even for secession cannot easily be determined. The argument is based upon the study of each case of secession within its own circumstances. The approach is to ascribe perceptions and apprehensions to the community through a process of scrutinizing and ultimately understanding the significant issues of the time. The approach does presuppose both the existence of basic human elements of motivation for such inspired acts as secession and the possibility that these common human elements of motivation can be discerned through comparative study.

The argument itself is organized into three main sections. Part I establishes the conceptual foundation for the subsequent analysis of secession. Potential territorial rearrangement and the creation of new states have not always been a possible outlet for discontent. Several elements are necessary for a secession crisis: an identifiable unit of people or "distinct community," territory, leaders, and discontent. The four chapters of Part II describe in detail the cost/benefit framework, its four variables, and the economic, political, and cultural factors which constitute each. Focusing on the dynamic of secession, Part III

addresses directly the question of why groups decide to secede. Its four chapters explore the way in which changes in the balance among the four primary variables precipitate secession attempts.

Expressions of surprise have greeted the recent eruption of secessionary activity in Europe. None the less, a broader perspective of European history easily demonstrates that secession is not a novel phenomenon. As James Crawford notes, "... until this century, secession was certainly the most conspicuous, as well as probably the most usual method of the creation of new states".[3] Crawford lists numerous examples of secession between 1776 and 1900; if he had extended this time period to include the immediate post-World War I era, his list would have been substantially enlarged.[4]

Given the rising incidence of secessionist activity in developing countries, in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, and in Western liberal democracies, this study of secession is a timely addition to this less-well-developed area of social science and international relations research. Potential extrapolations of such a study would involve reflections on sovereignty, since sovereign status is the key attribute of the state to which secessionists aspire. Moreover, the numerous case studies may reveal the extent to which a state's treatment of its distinct communities contributes to the decision to secede. A fuller explanation of the connection between changes in the four primary variables and the decision to secede would reveal the conditions under which states can influence such decisions. It would indicate the policies useful in the pursuit of particular outcomes in the secession dynamic and the limits of their effectiveness. Thus, from a better understanding of the "snapshot," we may be able to sketch in the rest of the moving picture. From a clearer understanding of the timing of the decision to secede, we may be able to draw conclusions on some of the means, which are theoretically possible, for the prevention and resolution of secession crises.

My intention is to gain a better understanding of the decision to secede; it is neither to condone nor to condemn specific secession attempts. The strength of the proposed framework lies in its cross-cultural applicability to secession and in its ability to help discern and organize the numerous causal patterns of secession. The book seeks to

[3] James Crawford, *The Creation of States in International Law* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 247.
[4] Finland, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were but a few of the states created through the process of secession directly after World War I.

demonstrate that a comprehensive perspective on secession can provide a more useful approach than the currently prominent, segmented theories which concentrate on certain regional factors to explain secessionist difficulties. If it generates discussion and debate, I will consider it a success.

2 Theoretical foundation for analysis of the decision to secede

This chapter begins by discussing the process of disintegration, then introduces the four necessary elements for secession: a distinct community, territory, leaders, and discontent. Furthermore, while specifying these four elements, the chapter also discusses the use of "distinct community" in place of other terms such as "nation" or "ethnic group." The chapter then moves on to the debate concerning the "right" to secede in order to provide a solid foundation for the subsequent discussion of the analytical framework investigating the secession decision. The analytical framework is grounded in a set of costs and benefits, as perceived by the distinct community, of the political alternatives of continued membership in the existing state and secession. The cost/benefit approach elucidates many of the considerations and factors in a secession decision, but cannot and does not address the moral questions inherent in the secession dynamic. Critical to any specific secession is its own internal justification; of central importance to any study of secession crises are the moral issues concerning their justification. The analytical framework therefore rests on this normative bedrock underpinning secession. The book argues, however, that moral justifications, although integral to the understanding of a secession attempt, are not sufficient in and of themselves to explain the timing of the decision to secede. For a community to decide to secede, it must perceive a change in its circumstances and its political alternatives.

Disintegration and the "secession crisis"

Secession is a logical, although not inevitable, conclusion of the process of political disintegration. Borrowing Ernst Haas's definition,

political integration is "the process whereby political actors in several distinct political systems are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations, and political activities toward a new center, the institutions of which possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing subsystem."[1] By contrast, the decision to secede represents an instance of political disintegration, wherein political actors in one or more subsystems withdraw their loyalties from the jurisdictional center to focus them on a center of their own.

This process of disintegration, however, can ultimately result in numerous different outcomes due to the "the fickleness and elasticity" of separatists' demands.[2] The demands of a disgruntled community fluctuate. Although separatist movements vary widely in terms of intensity, degree of violence, and duration, their demands usually fall on a political spectrum somewhere between demanding greater regional autonomy and outright secession. At any particular time, a movement may include those who push for secession, and others who press for domestic change. Leaders may blur their demands due to their own uncertainty or due to strategic considerations. For instance, leaders may espouse secession as the primary goal to strengthen their negotiating position for greater devolution, or they may espouse separatist aims to consolidate their base of support and thus enable them to pursue secession in the future.

Nevertheless, a clear demarcation between separatism and secession is necessary because my aim is to investigate those factors which constrain a discontented community to settle for a position within the existing state in one instance, while provoking another similarly discontented community into declaring independence. For the purposes of this book, the crucial distinction between separatism and secession lies in the willingness or unwillingness of the discontented community to recognize the sovereignty of the existing political authority. The definition of secession used here emphasizes the formal withdrawal of a constituent unit from an established, internationally recognized state and the creation of a new sovereign state.

Employing this definition of secession, I have specifically excluded several different processes of disintegration. First, secessions from sub-state authorities are excluded. The protracted secession of the Jura districts from the canton of Bern from 1947 to 1977, the creation of the

[1] Ernst Haas, *The Uniting of Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 16.
[2] Donald Horowitz, "Patterns of Ethnic Separatism," *Comparative Studies of Society and History*, 23, 2 (April 1981), 169.

Hutt River Province in Western Australia in the 1970s, and the recent proposals for the withdrawal of Staten Island from New York City will not be investigated. Second, demands for a state to relinquish control of its overseas empire are excluded. The recognized process of decolonization during the post-World War II era will not be investigated.[3] In this argument, therefore, attention is restricted largely to the nineteenth and twentieth-century creation of the state.

Our working definition of the critical moment of secession, or "secession crisis," reinforces the centrality of the state:

> *A secession crisis occurs when the leaders representing a territorially concentrated and distinct community within a larger state translate discontent into demands for secession, and possess the power, either through sufficiently strong internal community mobilization or through the use of force, to compel the central government to react to those demands.*

The crucial distinction here lies in the requirement that the central government in fact reacts to the demands for secession.

The four necessary elements of a secession crisis

The proposed definition of a secession crisis implies four necessary elements: a "distinct community," territory, leaders, and discontent. First, the demands must be presented by an identifiable unit, or *distinct community*, which is smaller than the state and which threatens

[3] The arbitrariness of this division is apparent, as the numerous accusations of internal colonialism in the former Soviet Union reveal. Many Europeans, including the Russian monarchy, shared the imperial ambitions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some achieved relatively more success in retaining control of the territory occupied during their period of imperial expansion. Writing in 1970, Robert Conquest in *The Nation Killers: The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities* (London: Macmillan, p. 10) has vividly pointed out this arbitrariness:

> the nations of the Crimea and the Caucusus [inhabited] territories which the Russians invaded only at the end of the 18th century, and did not finally subdue until the latter half of the 19th century. The Crimea was annexed only in 1783, at the time of the British annexation of Oudh, and by similar methods. The Caucasian annexations were only completed in the 1860s at the time of the British annexations in Africa. In fact, these territories are not old Russian lands, or even old dependencies, but were annexed as part of the great wave of European imperialist expansion.
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> A comparison may indeed be made between the present situation of those parts of Asia similarly and simultaneously brought under the rule of Britain and Russia. The present map shows, instead of the vast stretch of dependent territory from the Persian Gulf to the China Sea, a few islands and strips of coast still coming under London's control. The area under Moscow's control remains the same as in Tsarist times.

to withdraw if not satisfied. Political protests would not normally lead to secession crises. The May 1989 mass demonstrations by Chinese students and workers in Tienanmen Square demanding increased political rights from a repressive totalitarian regime did not lead to a secession crisis, since the demonstrators' intentions were not to pull out of the People's Republic but rather to reform its government. The following section explains the reasons for using "distinct community" in place of other possible descriptions.[4]

Second, this identifiable unit of people must be associated with a geographical *territory*, on which it would presumably intend to establish its new independent state. Because they are dispersed across the United States, African Americans are unlikely to translate demands to end racial discrimination into calls for secession. Third, *leadership* of the movement is necessary both to translate the community's needs into demands for secession and to organize efforts to make its threats credible. Without effective leadership, threats to the community might merely generate social disorder and violence as pent-up frustrations are vented. Fourth, *discontent* with its current circumstances within the existing state is necessary to motivate this identifiable unit to demand change, although in any individual case the causes of discontent are not necessarily identical to the motivations for the secession decision. Often the distinct community is bound together by common claims or perceptions of discrimination, neglect, exploitation, or repression, in economic, political, cultural, linguistic, or religious terms. *The Declaration of Independence* points to the "unbearable tyranny of the state" as both the reason, in the sense of providing the motivating force, and the moral justification for secession.[5]

[4] The description of distinct community would logically include cross-border groups such as the Somalis. Although irredentism is not the book's primary focus, the pressures for and the process of irredentism change share some similarities with the dynamic of secession.

[5] The eloquence and precision with which *The Declaration of Independence* of the United States justifies secession from despotic rule deserves further quotation:

> When in the Course of Human Events, it becomes necessary for one People to dissolve the Political Bonds which have connected them with one another, and to assume among the Powers of the Earth, the separate and Equal Station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the Separation.
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> We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness – That to secure