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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

California Split

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SOMETHING interesting is happening in California. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger seems to have grasped the essential truth that no nation — not even the United States — can be managed successfully from the center once it reaches a certain scale. Moreover, the bold proposals that Mr. Schwarzenegger is now making for everything from universal health care to global warming point to the kind of decentralization of power which, once started, could easily shake up America's fundamental political structure.

Governor Schwarzenegger is quite clear that California is not simply another state. "We are the modern equivalent of the ancient city-states of Athens and Sparta," he recently declared. "We have the economic strength, we have the population and the technological force of a nation-state." In his inaugural address, Mr. Schwarzenegger proclaimed, "We are a good and global commonwealth."

Political rhetoric? Maybe. But California's governor has also put his finger on a little discussed flaw in America's constitutional formula. The United States is almost certainly too big to be a meaningful democracy. What does "participatory democracy" mean in a continent? Sooner or later, a profound, probably regional, decentralization of the federal system may be all but inevitable.

A recent study by the economists Alberto Alesina of Harvard and Enrico Spolaore of Tufts demonstrates that the bigger the nation, the harder it becomes for the government to meet the needs of its dispersed population. Regions that don't feel well served by the government's distribution of goods and services then have an incentive to take independent action, the economists note.

Scale also determines who has privileged access to the country's news media and who can shape its political discourse. In very large nations, television and other forms of political communication are extremely costly. President Bush alone spent \$345 million in his 2004 election campaign. This gives added leverage to elites, who have better corporate connections and greater resources than non-elites. The priorities of those elites often differ from state and regional priorities.

James Madison, the architect of the United States Constitution, understood these problems all too well. Madison is usually viewed as favoring constructing the nation on a large scale. What he urged, in fact, was that a nation of reasonable size had advantages over a very small one. But writing to Jefferson at a time when the population of the United States was a mere four million, Madison expressed concern that if the nation grew too big, elites at the center would divide and conquer a widely dispersed population, producing "tyranny."

Few Americans realize just how huge this nation is. Germany could fit within the borders of Montana. France is

smaller than Texas. Leaving aside three nations with large, unpopulated land masses (Russia, Canada and Australia), the United States is geographically larger than all the other advanced industrial countries taken together. Critically, the American population, now roughly 300 million, is projected to reach more than 400 million by the middle of this century. A high Census Bureau estimate suggests it could reach 1.2 billion by 2100.

If the scale of a country renders it unmanageable, there are two possible responses. One is a breakup of the nation; the other is a radical decentralization of power. More than half of the world's 200 nations formed as breakaways after 1946. These days, many nations — including Brazil, Britain, Canada, China, France, Italy and Spain, just to name a few — are devolving power to regions in various ways.

Decades before President Bush decided to teach Iraq a lesson, George F. Kennan worried that what he called our “monster country” would, through the “hubris of inordinate size,” inevitably become a menace, intervening all too often in other nations' affairs: “There is a real question as to whether ‘bigness’ in a body politic is not an evil in itself, quite aside from the policies pursued in its name.”

Kennan proposed that devolution, “while retaining certain of the rudiments of a federal government,” might yield a “dozen constituent republics, absorbing not only the powers of the existing states but a considerable part of those of the present federal establishment.”

Regional devolution would most likely be initiated by a very large state with a distinct sense of itself and aspirations greater than Washington can handle. The obvious candidate is California, a state that has the eighth-largest economy in the world.

If such a state decided to get serious about determining its own fate, other states would have little choice but to act, too. One response might be for an area like New England, which already has many regional interstate arrangements, to follow California's initiative — as it already has on some environmental measures. And if one or two large regions began to take action, other state groupings in the Northwest, Southwest and elsewhere would be likely to follow.

A new wave of regional devolution could also build on the more than 200 compacts that now allow groups of states to cooperate on environmental, economic, transportation and other problems. Most likely, regional empowerment would be popular: when the Appalachian Regional Commission was established in 1965, senators from across the country rushed to demand commissions to help the economies and constituencies of their regions, too.

Governor Schwarzenegger may not have thought through the implications of continuing to assert forcefully his “nation-state” ambitions. But he appears to have an expansive sense of the possibilities: this is the governor, after all, who brought Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain to the Port of Long Beach last year to sign an accord between California and Britain on global warming. And he may be closer to the mark than he knows with his dream that “California, the nation-state, the harmonious state, the prosperous state, the cutting-edge state, becomes a model, not just for the 21st-century American society, but for the larger world.”

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