

# THE HERITAGE LECTURES

**409**

**Why Congress  
Doesn't Work  
Part II:  
Promoting  
Accountability  
and Direction**

*By Representative Jim Nussle*



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# Why Congress Doesn't Work

## Part II:

### Promoting Accountability and Direction

By Representative Jim Nussle

I am here to speak to you today about a issue, or more specifically, a movement which is sweeping our country. It's been spotted on Capitol Hill, in the White House, and around the government agencies, and it's quickly gaining speed as it travels coast to coast, north to south, and east to west. It's called "Reform," and I would like to begin our discussion with the words of Thomas Jefferson by saying:

I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and Constitutions. But laws and institutions go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times.

If our government is to meet the demands of the changing times, it must first face the reality and necessity of reform. If our government is to answer the calls for reform, it must devise a strategy for our future to provide for economic growth, a balanced budget, quality health care, education, and family preservation. If our government is to succeed in this challenge, it must restore the American people's faith in an institution which seems to have lost its direction.

I believe a major factor in the people's disillusionment with our government stems from Congress's inability, and apparent unwillingness, to provide any plan for our future. This failure to address our national crisis is caused by a lack of people in Congress with the common sense to sit down together, roll up their sleeves, and develop a plan. Instead, what we have is a lot of partisan politicking and no-win solutions. What we desperately need are citizen representatives to take back our government from professional politicians who go-along-to-get-along with the business-as-usual that got us to this point in the first place.

**Citizen Representative.** When I first ran for Congress, I pledged to be a citizen representative, and in my travels each weekend throughout my district, I have learned of the seriousness of the problems that plague our country. My home state of Iowa is known for good government and generally has been isolated from many of those problems. But recently, I think some of the same problems that plague the rest of the country have been plaguing Iowa. And it has angered voters. Much of that anger, I think, is being expressed in some public opinion polls. As an example, the *Des Moines Register*, which is the state's largest newspaper, recently conducted what they call the "Iowa Poll." Basically, the headline of the article that followed read, "Poll: Iowans Disillusioned by Politicians." That probably does not surprise any of you, but it shows this is happening everywhere, even in the Heartland.

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I wanted to go through some of the items of that poll, because for Iowans, obviously, this attitude is a change. We have trusted our government officials. We like to believe in our Representatives. And so for this change to occur, it means that something is desperately wrong. Let me give you some examples from the poll: 1) Do you favor term limits? 75 percent said, "Yes." 2) Do you approve of the way Congress is performing? 67 percent answered, "No." 3) With this statement, "It really doesn't matter who is in office, nothing really changes," 35 percent agreed. 4) That "Most politicians are crooks," 36 percent agreed. 5) And to the big question, at least the question that I think was most important, "Government seems unable to fix the really big problems," 83 percent of Iowans agreed that government seems unequipped to fix the really big problems. So Iowans are just as disillusioned as the rest of America.

When I was running for Congress the first time, I was on the campaign trail in Dubuque, which is one of the bigger cities in my congressional district, and I was giving the best possible stump speech I could. A woman came up to me afterward, and she shook her finger at me, and said, "You know, I agree with all the principles that you are espousing and I believe in the things that you want to fight for; but you know, you are going to change. You are going to become just like the rest of them." And I have been fighting, I think, maybe personally ever since, to prove that woman wrong — that you do not have to come to Washington and change, that her attitude of disillusion with politics and politicians can be changed overnight, or at least with a little bit of tender loving care.

**Crisis Management.** I also have the feeling that we have seen in the last 25 years the same issues come up, the same concerns, and yet, very little progress. Put yourself in a town meeting 25 years ago. What were some of the issues: the budget deficit, health care, education, generational welfare, lack of jobs, the economy. These are all issues that have plagued us for the last 25 years. And we have continually sent new Representatives to Washington, D.C., to deal with these problems — people who had all the right tools, who were sincere, who believed in what they wanted to do, who were principled, who wanted to bring about change, and yet, what do we have? We still have nearing \$400 billion a year in budget deficits, a growing national debt closing in on \$4 trillion, a legacy of generational welfare that we seem unable to break, an unstable economy as witnessed from this last week's jobless figures, inadequate health care that is too costly for most Americans, pork barrel politics where politicians basically buy your vote with your money, an entrenched and unresponsive bureaucracy that seems unable to deal with the problems that bureaucracy was initially created to solve, and crisis management. I would say, in my opinion, that the modus operandi in addressing all of the complicated concerns and issues that plague the country, is crisis management. This means that Congress and the President manage this country by the seat of their pants. And the seat of their pants ends up being the seat of the taxpayers' pants. Is it any wonder that 83 percent of Iowans, and probably a similar amount of other Americans, are disillusioned and believe that government really cannot fix the problems, that we have lost our direction? With those kinds of figures, and with that kind of track record, I am not surprised.

Why have we been unable to deal with these problems? There may be many possible reasons. I have written down a few ideas of where we may have lost our way: 1) Divided government. The fact that we had one party in the White House and a different party in the Congress may be one reason. 2) Lack of leadership. And when I say that, I don't mean people who are just willing to throw out an idea, but those who really will work the idea, really lead the country, setting forth what they believe is important. 3) Politicians more worried about their re-election than the good of the country. 4) There is no long-range plan for the country. 5) We have lack of communication among members of Congress. 6) Politicians appear to be out of touch with their constituents. 7) The influence of special interests. 8) Too many committees and subcommittees. 9) No time to concentrate on the issues, because of many other time-consuming concerns that

plague us around here, like the mating habits of frogs and whether or not to have a commemorative coin. 10) A belief that government basically can solve many of these problems, when maybe it cannot; or maybe it has to have a private, non-government solution or component to the solution.

**Anger and Disillusion.** I think the people's disillusion is real. I feel it every weekend when I am home — this last weekend was no different. People are concerned about their future, about their kids' futures, and I think that they look at Washington and see us not resolving these issues. I think this anger and disillusion can manifest itself in many different ways; for instance, H. Ross Perot, I think, is the result of much of the disillusion in this country. I also believe that the violence in Los Angeles and New York is possibly a result of this disillusion or the belief of the rioters that they do not have to conform to authority.

How do we stop this anger and disillusion? How do we prevent it from happening again? How do we change? Most authors say that there is a three-step process for any change. First, you must believe that something must change. Second, you must believe that you have to get involved in that change. And third, you have to believe that change can happen. So, number one, you have to believe something must change. Number two, you have to believe you must work to change it. And number three, you must believe that you can, and eventually will, change it. I believe Congress must change. I believe that I can work to change Congress. And I believe, eventually, I can change Congress.

What is the goal of congressional reform? I believe congressional reform encompasses a wide variety of issues and proposals for changing the way Congress operates. All of them have one common aim, however: restoring the American people's faith in an institution that basically seems to have lost its way. I believe that until the American people regain confidence in Congress's ability to address the pressing issues facing the country, Congress will continue to be ineffective in dealing with the important issues, like health care, education, the economy and the huge budget deficit.

**Accountability and Planning.** There are some elements, I believe, that congressional reform should entail, and I have tried to break them down into two that are easy to remember. First, Congress must enact reforms that make them truly accountable to the American people. Second, Congress must demonstrate that it has a clear direction or a plan for the future of the country. So, accountability and planning. And I think if we accomplish those two goals, we will be well on our way to regaining the faith of the American people.

Let us look at each of these elements of reform. Number one, accountability. I would say that accountability is a two-way street: It is a shared responsibility between the people and their representatives. By that I mean that Representatives and Senators should be accountable to their constituents, and their constituents should hold their Representatives and Senators accountable for their actions or inactions. The need has never been greater to enact reforms that bring accountability back to the institution that has failed to act in response to the urgent needs of the American people. 1) What should the people do at home to improve the communications between them and their Representatives, and to hold their Representatives accountable for their actions and inactions? 2) What should Representatives and Senators do in Washington to better communicate and be more accountable to the people they represent?

There are five categories that we need to focus on in order to answer those two questions and to achieve those goals. You must, first of all, reform and encourage constituent participation. This may be the most important, and yet the hardest part of congressional reform, because of the catch-22. I have heard this manifest itself in many conversations that I have had with Iowans. Someone will say, "Well, you are not listening; therefore, I am not going to get involved." And

the less people get involved, the less we listen; and so, the less they get involved. And it continues to spiral. But we have to break that somehow to get people involved again.

Improvement of communications comes in various forms; but I think one of the best is for Representatives to be home and available — available to listen to their constituents and interact with them. Simplifying the government process may be another way to allow people not only to get involved, but also to understand that their involvement counts. And finally, we have to figure out a way to turn their anger into positive action and change.

So, number one is reform to encourage constituent participation. Number two is reform of the administration of the Congress. With regard to reforming the administration of Congress, I think we need to address a number of concerns — the management and accountability of our money in Congress; the applicability of laws to the Congress, the fact that we can exempt ourselves from these laws; office space and facilities, which may not seem very important, but yet technology and building space must be used to the best of our ability so that we can have an efficiently run Congress; disposal of unexpended funds, not having a Speaker's slush fund through which the Speaker may have control over vast amounts of money that are unspent at the end of the year; and an annual accounting of Congress which, I think, also is necessary. Reforms of management and administration are very important. We are on the road to such reform with what has occurred thus far in the year; but much more has to occur.

**Budget Reforms.** Number three is reform of the congressional budget process and procedure. This addresses a number of different issues — budget process reform, balanced budget amendment, emergency supplementals, continuing resolutions, the congressional budget act itself, the budget enforcement act, merit pay (which is one of my proposals) to tie Representatives' salaries to their effectiveness in balancing the budget, the expanded rescission that the President attempted this year, the line-item veto, performance-based budgeting as well as zero-based budgeting, where every year you zero out and justify the existence of every committee, agency, department, and so forth. I think these are ways that we can at least bring the debate on the budget process to a head and get some better accountability in that area.

Fourth would be the legislative operations of Congress. And this is where we interact, where among themselves, members of Congress communicate — I think there are a number of areas here to be worked on. As rules are reformed, we must also reform the calendar and schedules. We are able to squeeze our time into about Tuesday through Thursday, and Mondays and Fridays are wasted. And it is amazing how much work goes on from 4:00 p.m. until 7:00 p.m., yet very little goes on the rest of the day. Furthermore, work is needed on motions to re-commit, suspension of the rules, discharge procedures, recorded votes, accountability, commemoratives (we mentioned that once), the coverage of the House proceedings by C-SPAN, authorizing committee reporting deadlines. That may be a good way to do it — if you give a bill or an idea to a committee, you give them a deadline to bring it back. We are talking also about jurisdiction, pocket vetoes, veto overrides, the length of the session. These are all ways, I think, that we can talk about the ebb and flow of information, the ebb and flow of the issues, in the legislative operations of Congress.

Finally, number five is a total overhaul of congressional campaigns. This would address financing, contributions — including such matters as PACs, special interests, and soft money — the length of the campaign and the way we report contributions. I think for too long we have buried our heads in the sand about this particular issue.

I have introduced a couple pieces of legislation to deal with some of the accountability issues. I call it the Citizen Representative Reform Act. It has been in the pipeline for a while now, and it is receiving a little bit of support, but not quite enough to be any kind of major movement. I want to go over the five parts of my Citizen Representative Reform Act.

**1) Merit pay.** Tying our salaries, as members of Congress, to our ability to balance the budget. I recommend that every time the budget deficit goes up, our pay gets cut by 5 percent until we wipe out the deficit. I think we would wipe it out tomorrow.

**2) A provision called Go Home.** And I love this provision, because it basically says we have to finish our legislative business during the fiscal year. And if we cannot get it done, we are docked one day's pay for every day we stay in past the end of the fiscal year.

**3) A bill that I call "Live Like We Do."** What that means is that we have to have the same kinds of perks and privileges that our constituents have, which are few and far between; as well as, we cannot exempt ourselves from the laws that we pass.

**4) Use a Stamp.** It eliminates the franking privilege.

**5) New Blood.** Term limitation.

You might wonder where I get the titles for some of these? I get the titles from town meetings, from constituents to whom I have talked and who said, "You know what we need out in Washington? We need some new blood. You know what? You guys shouldn't spend so much time in Washington — you ought to go home. You ought to use a stamp; you shouldn't be able to sign your name at the top corner of an envelope. And why don't you live like we do? Walk a day in our shoes." Those are some of the issues that I hear back in Iowa; and I have appropriately named those provisions after those comments.

So first is accountability. It encompasses a wide variety of issues, some that we may not be able to deal with in the short run, but we need definitely to discuss them.

The second part of reform is providing a clear direction for this country and for our future. What this entails is called long-term, strategic planning. This is part of the process that I think is missing the most from our current legislative procedure. In the year and a half that I have been there, I have been amazed that never, never during my period of time here in Washington, have I sat down with other members of Congress, or even for that matter, with the other members of my delegation from Iowa, and determined or decided what was important for our state and country. I think it is atrocious that that kind of leadership has not been available. And yet, what am I told as a freshman member of Congress? Sit in the back row and keep your mouth shut. Don't say anything. You are not supposed to rock the boat. Wait until you are here ten years. Wait until you are here twenty years, then maybe you can provide some planning, some leadership, some goal setting. I don't think so. I think it is about time that we start to wrestle this away. I think one of the ways to do it is to provide a long-term plan. I think Congress has to provide this leadership, setting priorities and goals as the first step. I think one of the major factors that causes people's disillusion is that they don't see us working on the goals that really seem to matter to the country.

My outline for a strategic plan begins with four components.

**1) Communication among the members of Congress.** We have to assess our current situation and begin to stimulate communication between our elected Representatives. What do I mean by that? Have you ever watched C-SPAN and wondered why it takes so long for the Speaker of the House to gavel us to be quiet in between votes? Do you ever wonder why that happens? I'll tell you why. Because after we have been apart from all of those folks for so long, both during the day and over weekends and recesses, you have to find out what has been happening. And so we spend most of that time almost like the huddle on the mound during a baseball game in which

they are not necessarily talking about the next pitch. The Congressmen are saying, "Well, how are the kids? What is happening in your district? What is important to the folks back home? How did your town meeting go?" It is not necessarily on the next issue facing the Congress. But we need that time to interact and to become human beings again and talk about the real issues.

2) We have to sit down and set goals and priorities. You might think that this has already been done, but ask yourself, what are the goals and priorities for this country? Some might say, "Education is important." Yes, but have we really determined that it is a goal? Is health care a goal? If they were goals, why haven't they been dealt with yet? And why don't we have a plan of action, together with deadlines, to address those problems?

3) After you set the goals, you have to have an action plan. You have to determine, "How are you going to get this done? Are you going to solve health care?" You may not necessarily have to address the specific proposals, but you can say, "By the end of the year, we are going to have three ready for debate and discussion."

4) **You have to have a review mechanism.** You have to be able to provide oversight and review, for not only your goals, because your goals may change — hopefully they will as you continue to achieve your goals — but also you have to have a way to monitor the action plan that you have put together.

In summary, it is basically very simple. Where are we? Where have we been? Where are we going? How are we going to get there? Those are the questions that Congress has to ask itself. It is not that complicated. People like Senator Byrd may think it is complicated. I think he called it "twaddle" in the 20/20 interview about pork barrel spending and how some of us who have been addressing these issues maybe do not have our eyes on the ball, but I think it is that simple.

I have had more stimulating debates in cafes in Iowa and at annual meetings of church councils than I have had on the floor of the House of Representatives. And I think in order to bring that debate here, we have to start talking about the goals, priorities, and action plans for this country.

What are Jim Nussle's goals? I think they may apply to the country, but let me throw them out for discussion.

1) **Stability and eventual growth for the economy.** Sounds like a lofty goal, but how do you approach it? I think there are a number of ways — health care, education, infrastructure, marketing, trade — those are ways that you can address the long-term economic needs. Those are economic development goals that my city of Manchester, Iowa, put down. They are the same ones. How do you address education, health care, infrastructure, marketing, people, money? Those are all issues that Manchester, Iowa, set out as their economic goals. The country's are not much different than that, they are just much bigger.

2) **Re-shaping and re-defining our nation's defense.** As we all know, the Cold War is over; and yet the debate last week on the defense budget was over money, not necessarily over priorities of new systems or new strategies for the future.

3) **Institutional governmental reform.** This is the bureaucracy. I can't tell you how many complaints I have had from people back home who say, "The government is supposed to be working for me, but it is almost like a gestapo." I am amazed at the kind of words I hear from them. They say, "Instead of teaching and leading and guiding and educating us, they come in and they hit us over the head with a hammer."



4) **Congressional reform, because this is the way we deal with the new issues of the day.**

5) **Re-definition of our nation's leadership role in the world.**

These are Jim Nussle's goals. These are the goals that I would put forth if someone said, "Nussle, what are your goals?" I think we need an action plan for each one.

What happens when you change a system? What happens when maybe you change the way we deal with things? Folks buck at that. They don't like change. We are creatures of repetition. We like things the way they are. Let me read you a quotation from a person you probably would not have thought believed in much change. It goes like this:

The country needs, and unless I mistake its temper, demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.

You know who said that? Franklin D. Roosevelt, the architect of not only the New Deal, but our current welfare state (with a little bit of tinkering from the Johnson Administration and the Great Society). But by and large, what he was saying is that what worked back in the 1940s may not work in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, or in the next century, and it is time to change — above all, try something.

If you believe your tax dollars are being put to the best possible use, then you don't believe in change. If you believe that you are tired of business as usual, like so many other people are, then it is time to put together a new vision and a new plan — to try something.

**Evidence of Reform.** How do we know whether Congress is going to change? There are some signals that Congress is already beginning to change — much, I think, because of the actions of a few freshmen, coupled with some other reformers who have been here since I was a junior in high school, who have been here to reform Congress for all that time — and the spark has not died. But some of the things have already occurred, from the bank scandal to the post office scandal, to the balanced budget amendment vote this year (which was predicted not even to occur before the next election). I think the vote was forced because of reform. The Madison Amendment on pay raises is a result of reform. Other evidences of reform are the reduction of many of the unnecessary perks and privileges, done unilaterally by the Speaker without any kind of legislation; the passage of the Hamilton/Gradison Committee, the Joint Committee on the Reorganization of Congress. I serve on the Republican Task Force for the Organization of Congress, a task force that has just been set up by the Republican side as a way of funneling through ideas. Other evidence includes what you have seen in retirements and defeats in primaries. I think we are going to continue to see that trend when it comes to turnover in the House and Senate after November.

How do we provide a forum for change? This is one way to start, and Heritage has been excellent at that, and I think will continue to be. Heritage already is putting together an orientation for the new freshmen to talk about a number of these issues — an orientation that will take the place of the typical trip that is taken every year up to Harvard University. I think this is a great coup that has been pulled off, and one that I hope to participate in. There are also monthly meetings that occur all over the District of Columbia — one that the Free Congress Foundation and Heritage have put together that I have chaired since January. Also, we now have a committee in Congress to start to begin to study re-organization of Congress. We hope that the Senate will follow suit.

Let me finish with a couple of thoughts from the past. Benjamin Franklin said once that “the preservation of our form of government depends on our constant vigilance.” That is very true. We are seeing this idea again manifest itself by the changes that are occurring over in Eastern Europe in the emerging democracies. They now have constant vigilance, more constant vigilance, I think, than we have ever had. Somewhere along the way, we have been negligent, in my estimation, and we have not kept that watchful eye on the institution of Congress. And now the people want their Congress back, and they are going to take it back. If you are like me, you want to head in the direction of a citizen legislature, as opposed to one that is made up of professional politicians and career politicians. But either way, we need leaders. We need Representatives who can lead us and guide us and prepare us to turn over to our children and our grandchildren a better future — one in which they can live, learn, raise a family, build a business, leaving their mark. Let us begin today by dedicating ourselves to that goal.

