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501

A Governors' Forum Lecture

Cut Their Pay
And
Send Them Home

By Lamar Alexander



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Cut Their Pay and Send Them Home

By Lamar Alexander

It seems almost rude—suggesting to a Capitol Hill audience: cut your pay and send yourselves home. I am talking, of course, about the U.S. Congress.

To Jeff Greenfield, this proposal seemed both inspiring and outrageous. “What do you do,” he asked, “when a blatantly political bit of demagoguery also happens to be a good idea?”

To *Roll Call*'s editors, it seemed not so threatening. “Mother of All Reforms,” the headline read, but the story said that opposition in Congress is virtually unanimous.

To Norman Ornstein, safe in a D.C. think tank, it seemed “ridiculous: the fact that leaders such as Alexander tout the idea just proves that otherwise sensible people just lose it sometimes. It is hard to imagine a dumber idea.”

I would like to offer today a different perspective. For the last several weeks I have been driving across America, staying in homes with people, most of whom I have never met before, eating supper with them, staying up late talking. Some of you who have known me for a while know I did a similar thing 16 years ago when I walked 1,000 miles across Tennessee over six months to become its governor. If I could figure out a sensible way to walk across the United States, I would probably be doing that. But driving is the next best thing, and it is something a great many Americans of all ages do in the summertime.

A Wonderful—But Grumpy—Country

Out there on the interstates and back roads of America, even the roads themselves remind you what a really magnificent country this is. When our family lived in Australia a few years ago, one Aussie said to me, “Do you realize that no other country has an interstate system like you Americans have?” I had never thought of that.

But, driving across it, if you take the temperature of this wonderful country, you find it also troubled and grumpy. A bumper sticker on Interstate 10 in Louisiana said, “Make Welfare As Hard To Get As A Building Permit.” Another one in South Carolina said, “I Love My Country, But I Fear My Government.”

Here we are, at peace in the world; the economy is growing; there is one superpower and we're it; 20 percent of all the world's money is in our pockets. We win most of the Nobel Prizes. Our universities are the ones everyone wants to attend. People are this very minute swimming, floating, and running to reach our borders and live in this country—yet we are grumpy and off track. We sense that something is wrong. We are—too many of us—losing our sense of optimism about our future.

Almost everyone I've visited with on this drive believes that our condition is primarily a trouble of the spirit, and that at heart we already know what to do about it. Where I've been, there is very little interest in re-inventing America from Washington, D.C., and a great deal of interest in reminding ourselves what made this such a great country in the first place. Nearly

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He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on July 27, 1994, sponsored by The Heritage Foundation's Governors' Forum.

ISSN 0272-1155 © 1994 by The Heritage Foundation.

everyone I've visited believes that the answers are in our homes, our shops, meeting halls, diners, community centers, synagogues, churches, and in the classrooms of America. Hardly anybody believes the answers are in Washington, D.C.

Let me be more specific about what I've been hearing at the supper table and in my late evening conversations.

What I've Been Hearing

Let me start with what I have not been hearing. It struck me this morning as I read the Washington newspapers, consumed by Whitewatergate and health care, that during the past three weeks on my drive I've probably heard seven minutes total about those two subjects. And all seven minutes have been on health care.

What I have heard about is crime. People are afraid to take walks in their neighborhoods, and not just in big cities. Henning, Tennessee, population 1,200—my old friend Alex Haley's home town—had its first drive-by shooting this year.

Everyone has a welfare story. In Cassville, Missouri, I visited with a couple, both of whom are in their 20's and work on a production line, making \$7.79 and \$8.89 an hour. They know exactly what the federal benefits are in the Cassville area. They wonder why—when all the companies in the area are hiring—some of their friends make more not working than they do working.

In Dallas, at the homeless shelter, or in Pensacola, where the military is cutting back, there is a good deal of talk about jobs and the future. In truth, even though the economy is growing, most people are worried about their jobs and their future. Every year 10 percent of working Americans lose their jobs. Those who lose jobs almost always find new ones, but it is hard to count on anything when the economy is so turbulent.

Talk of jobs usually leads to talk about schools. Parents worry about losing control of their schools to Washington, D.C., bureaucrats, social scientists, and Hollywood values. They worry about their child's safety. They worry about whether their children are learning enough to survive in the new job market.

There are two subjects, however, that by far I hear the most about. The first is a feeling ranging from bewilderment to outrage at the size, growth, and meddlesomeness of the government in Washington, D.C. The second is a sense—getting back to that grumpiness I mentioned a moment ago—that the country is seriously off track; it has wandered away from the principles and institutions that made it so remarkable in the first place.

This second subject is expressed in many different ways in almost every visit. For example, I asked two Cherokee women in Eastern Oklahoma, "What's the biggest problem facing you?" And one, who works with federal grants, began immediately to say, "Well, we don't have the resources to do this program and the resources to do that program...." The other one listened for a while and said, "No, that's not it. We don't take the time to remember what is most important to us and pass it down. We don't take the time to remember what we need to hold fast and true."

Now, that is a pretty remarkable answer, actually, for a casual afternoon conversation. But I've found that most Americans, if given the chance, do not want to have a trivial conversation about this country. They are too worried about it. They want to talk about what kind of country we have, the concerns they have about its drift, about moving away from ideas that are important and about broken-down institutions that we've depended on in the past.

But my remarks today are about the first subject I've been hearing the most about—about the government in Washington, D.C. This is where we must start in order to help put the country back on track.

It's Washington, D.C., Stupid!

What has startled me in nearly three weeks so far of driving across America staying with people has been the depth and breadth of the sense of outrage and exasperation about the government in Washington—its spending, its growth, its meddling, its perceived arrogance.

In Henning, Tennessee, that little town of 1,200, they were talking about a woman whom everybody seemed to know. Every time she tried to get off welfare, she was pulled back by the loss of benefits as she moved ahead. Everybody wanted to help her, but they kept saying, "We can't fit the programs we get to help her." And the Mayor finally said, "Washington, D.C. does not know what Henning needs."

In Savannah, Georgia I spent the night with Henry Delaney, a minister who in 1989 moved to 32nd Street in the inner city and has literally taken it over. He grew his congregation from 300 members to 3,000. The church bought eight crack houses, moved drug dealers out and moved assistant ministers in. Rev. Delaney has started a school for boys. His wife has started a sort of charm school for girls. They're taking that street back. I spent the night with them and heard not one gunshot. He asked me, "Now, I know a lot of women who want to go to work," and he added up the \$250 they get for food stamps, the amount they get for AFDC, and all the other benefits and then the benefits they lose when they come to work. "Now this isn't so hard to figure out. Why don't they just let some of us here figure out how to help those who need it, as well as who doesn't deserve our help?"

At the homeless shelter in Dallas where I stayed, Father Jerry Hill, who has been working on the streets for 22 years in Chicago and Dallas, will not take a federal grant. He said, "I would rather raise the money. I got tired of spending Fridays filling out forms justifying how I spent Monday through Thursday." And he said, "Federal grants are making a nation of liars out of us." These are his words. "Because the money is offered for programs we don't need, and then we invent and manufacture applications to get the money to do the things that need to be done."

Father Hill is outraged that the government in Washington is now giving Social Security disability benefits to drug addicts. "I just throw up my hands, I can't help them," he said, "when they have \$446 a month of support for their dependency."

I couldn't repeat here what the self-employed contractor in Jackson, Mississippi, told me when I talked with him. He had spent all day filling out some government forms.

Here in Washington, D.C., everyone is talking about the crime bill Congress is trying to pass. I haven't run into anybody in three weeks who thinks it will make the street where they live safer. And I have run into only one law enforcement official who is for it. Now, there must be people who are for it, otherwise I'm sure the President and the Congress wouldn't be thinking about spending \$30 billion on such a thing. That's \$600 million or so in it for Tennessee. That's a lot of money.

In Baton Rouge, however, the Sheriff doesn't really want it, and probably won't hire any of the 100,000 police officers, because he said, "in two years the money will be gone and I'll have the employees and I won't have any way to pay them." And then he said, "I've just gotten through with the Brady Bill. I've had to hire two new employees and buy a bunch of fax machines, when my jail is overcrowded and we needed the money for that." During lunch, the District Attorney in Baton Rouge put it this way: "If they were cooking our dinner up there in

Washington, even if they were good cooks, by the time it got here it would be cold and we'd be gone."

There are many more examples and stories. The government in Washington devours our paycheck, promises too much, delivers too little, pretends to do things we know very well it can't do, tells people to do things they don't want to do, and then tells us to pay for it ourselves. You can understand why Washington has come to be regarded as a company town that has grown too big for its britches. It is the whole town: the Congress, the bureaucrats, the President, the media, the talk shows, and if you will excuse me, some think-tank talk, too. The sense of outrage among mainstream Americans right now should not be underestimated. It is the stuff of which uprisings are made.

Why It's Different This Time

When I report these feelings to my friends in Washington they nod solemnly as if they have heard it all before. In the spirit of Bill Bennett, I think of Aesop's fable about the boy who cried wolf once too often and was finally eaten when nobody listened.

Others suspect that I have cooked up this new discovery for political reasons. But this is not a new subject for me. I grew up in a mountain part of Tennessee where the stock and trade of Republican meetings is ranting and raving against the federal government. When I was Governor, I used to say that I spent more time in Japan than I did in Washington, because I thought it would help my state more. And it did.

More than ten years ago, I suggested to President Reagan that the government swap the states' share of Medicaid for federal elementary and secondary education funds. In other words, the federal government would take over all of Medicaid and the states and localities would take back full control of their elementary and secondary schools. When I became Chairman of the nation's governors in 1985, I thought the Governors were spending most of their time pretending to be U.S. Senators. I tried hard to put the focus back on our executive responsibilities at home.

Our country has become too focused on Washington. So has our Republican Party. At Southern Republican leadership meetings, it seemed all we would do was bring in well-respected people from Washington to talk about Washington issues. I became so exasperated that, in 1986, I helped form something called the Republican Exchange, so we could talk about how to how to create safe, clean communities where children could grow up healthy, go to a good school, and get a good job, which is what we were supposed to be working on.

In 1985, a group of Republican Congressmen led by Newt Gingrich and several of us activist Republican Governors spent a weekend in the Tennessee mountains to see whether we were really in the same party and on the same song sheet. Of course, we quickly agreed that we were—that good Republican philosophy is to put a harness on the government in Washington, and do what needs to be done in communities and in the private sector.

So this is not a new subject for me. What is new is the number of Americans who want Washington out of their everyday lives and the strength of their feeling about it.

Why This Is the Issue

Why has this happened? I think it's important to go back almost to the beginning of the century to a book that has kept popping up ever since it was written. It's called *The Promise of American Life*, by Herbert Croly. The title is magnificent, the first chapter is also magnificent, but for our time, the rest of the book is wrong. Nevertheless, it's worth paying attention to, because in 1909 Croly wrote that what's unique about this country is the unlimited belief in

America's future. That's what is different about America, together with the idea that any of us—from wherever we came—has the opportunity to have a piece of that future.

Croly argued that all of us just doing our own things in our communities didn't add up to enough, that we needed more of a national purpose and national identity. He liked what Lincoln had done and what Teddy Roosevelt was doing. So he argued for a stronger, more activist central government. He believed the federal government's role should be more than just national defense, monetary and commercial regulation, and the enforcement of our constitutional rights. He believed the government in Washington should get into the business of raising children, eradicating poverty, and creating opportunities and prosperity for all Americans.

This belief, which he articulated in a very compelling way, has been at the core of the near ceaseless expansion of the federal government, starting with the progressive era, through the New Deal and the Great Society, to today's supposedly "new" Democrats.

Just think of it: for over 80 years the federal government has been growing and growing, spending and spending, meddling and meddling. Particularly in the last 30 years, those numbers have grown into almost abstract figures. The number of federal employees has grown from just under 1 million in 1939 to almost 3 million today. Federal spending has gone from \$715 million in 1913 to nearly \$1.5 trillion today. We are now paying more in interest on the national debt than we are on national defense. The number of pages in the *Federal Register* has gone from 2,619 in 1936 to 61,000 in 1993. (The number of pages went down by over one-third during the Reagan Administration, but it is expected to be back up to 76,000 this year.)

We don't really need these numbers to be convinced. You don't even need to drive across America. We can read the newspapers and look around in our lives to see the continuing growth, spending, and meddling of the government. We can even watch on two channels what is going on in Congress: taxes in the name of creating jobs; "reinventing" welfare one more time from Washington, D.C.; a new national school board; turning the health care system over to the government to run.

One of the best examples of government interference is the GOALS 2000 federal education legislation that passed this year, which some were touting as the greatest bill ever. They're wrong: it takes us in exactly the wrong direction. It creates a national school board; pushes Governors out, and puts Washington experts in; puts the emphasis on "inputs" instead of results; bans tests with consequences; and fails to expand choices of schools for low- and middle-income families. Worst of all, it takes a national movement that the Governors had worked on for nearly ten years and turns it into a federal program. Nothing could be worse for our schools than taking a national education reform movement and turning it into a federal program.

Now we have a Senator from California, I understand, wanting to pass a federal law about what the weapons policy ought to be in all of America's 15,000 school districts! Well, why don't we go ahead and pass a law about what time school ought to start and who ought to empty the wastebasket and how to discipline a child who is disrespectful to a teacher. I mean, do we not need parents or teachers or principals or school boards or Governors or legislators anymore? Why on earth would we want members of Congress at a distance of 3,000 miles to be setting any sort of rule like that for local schools?

All of this adds up to a very serious problem. Washington, D.C., is on a collision course with the people of this country, because the government here keeps doing things that most Americans know very well it should not be doing. The government in Washington just keeps growing and growing and meddling and meddling.

This continuous expansion is one reason for the surge of this exasperation with the government, but there is another fundamental one we ought to recognize. We have gone through a great divide and are entering a very different age. Back when Croly was advocating a large centralized government, it was the industrial age, when more centralization was the way to accomplish great things. It was a time, too, when we started to fall in love with the idea of single solutions to our problems. Expertise and resources from Washington, it was imagined, could solve almost anything.

Now we have entered the age of information, and as the big, centralized industries have discovered, centralized bureaucracy and decision-making don't work very well anymore. This is a time for being fast on your feet, having instant access to information, ideas, and expertise from around the country and the world, dealing with the unexpected, and tailoring activities to fit particular circumstances. A large, central bureaucracy can't do that. That's true in almost every part of American life, and it is certainly true about government. As a result, such a bulky, meddling government in Washington has become a relic—it is obsolete. Precisely because life is larger and so much more complicated, we need much less—not much more—government in Washington.

The information age has given Americans in all walks of life the tools and the flexibility to start making more of their own decisions, to share ideas, to develop their own ways of solving problems. The era of the search for a single best way, whether to educate children, to help the down and out, or to preserve natural resources, has given way to our natural inclinations as Americans toward pluralism, creativity, and innovation. The lingering attitude here of “Washington knows best” and the efforts of the government in Washington to tell people in states and communities what to do run in exactly the wrong direction. This, too, adds to the exasperation with the federal government.

What We Need To Do

What can we do about this sense of exasperation?

Well, I think it is clear we need to take Herbert Croly's idea and roll it back in the other direction. We need to create a new promise of American life by getting the government in Washington out of the way. And we need to be very shrewd and hard-nosed about this. The time is right. The country is ready for big changes in Washington. This is going to be a decade of enormous reform—very nearly an uprising—to bring about change in the institutions of our central government.

Because the Democratic Party is so committed to the central government, so insistent on reinventing America from here, this creates an opening a mile wide for the Republican Party. But we have been timid about plowing through that opening. I believe that after 1996 the nation is likely to have a Republican government, that is, a Republican President and a Republican Congress—if for no other reason than because that is the only option that the voters have not yet tried. Republicans could advance that prospect by persuading the American people that, if they choose us, we will respond boldly by sending a good part of the federal government home. But between now and 1996 we must think strategically about this. We must decide upon, agree upon and advance big ideas that will actually work if we are given the opportunity to govern.

What I propose as a first step seems far-fetched, I'm sure, to many here. But I believe it is very mild compared to what may be coming down the pike during the rest of the 1990s.

Cut Their Pay and Send Them Home

We should cut the pay of Members of Congress and send them home. Here's how it would work. Congress could:

- ✓ **Convene on January 3rd**, just as it now does, pass the authorization bills to help the government run, and go home early in the baseball season.
- ✓ **Come back Labor Day**, pass the appropriations bills and any other urgent legislation, and be home by Thanksgiving.
- ✓ **Cut the pay** of Members in half and repeal the rules that keep them from holding real jobs and leading normal lives in their home towns. Pay Members adequate per diem for travel and expenses when they are in Washington.

If Members of Congress would eat more of their meals in diners in Jennings, Louisiana, or in Nashville, or in Billings or in Hartford or anywhere in America, if they lived back in those places and had their roots there, then when these hare-brained ideas come up—turning health care over to the government to run, or reinventing welfare for the seventh time in Washington, or even drafting a rule about whether you can wear a cross or Star of David to work—these ideas would never see the light of day.

I am talking about an old idea, this idea of the citizen legislator, the idea that our political leadership is supposed to be us. The notion is that a part time Congress of community leaders makes a better government than a full-time Congress of career politicians. The country began with such a citizen legislature and operated that way for most of its existence.

Former U.S. Senate leader Howard Baker, not particularly known as a revolutionary, was the prime spokesman for the citizen legislature in the early 1980s. No one paid much attention even though Senator Baker at that time was selected by Republican and Democratic Senators as their most respected colleague. He thought this idea of cutting their pay and sending them home would dignify the Congress by forcing it to concentrate on the most urgent issues.

Senator Baker said the other day on our Republican Neighborhood Meeting broadcast, "I love the Congress, but I don't think it's essential to stay in Washington and be captured by the Federal District. I'd like to see them in six months a year, and relieved of the total dependence of the federal paycheck. I'd like to see them once more become citizen legislators."

It is worth noting that Thomas Jefferson believed seven years was enough for any of America's diplomats to serve in another country. After that, he warned, "They'll cease to become citizens of the United States." The same thing applies to Members of Congress. If you move here, if you are forced by law to give up your normal job and income, if you put your kids in school here, it is very hard not to become a citizen of the District of Columbia and cease to be a citizen of the district you represent.

This idea—maybe more than any other—would begin to change the culture of the company town, and help to shift the focus away from Washington and back to communities.

Critics, of course, are apt to object by arguing that the business of the federal government has become too complicated and intricate to be handled by part-time legislators. I believe that one reason for this is because the work of Congress has expanded to fill the available time. Another reason is that Washington—with all its special interests and experts—also has a tendency to overcomplicate almost everything. Nobody I've seen on my drive has been jumping for joy over Congress's famous deficit reduction package and tax increases, or the 1,400 page health care reform bill. Regular Americans sitting around a kitchen table over a short period of time could

come up with more fair, straight-forward, and effective answers. It is possible and usually better to deal with large matters in an uncomplicated way. A time limit would encourage just that.

On my drive I stopped by Houston. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison was there. After my remarks, Kay said, "It's a great idea. We should cut our pay and send ourselves home. It is the kind of Congress the framers imagined." It may cause snorts here in Washington, but in Dallas and Fort Smith and Savannah and Hartford and all the places that I've been, it first brings smiles and then applause and then people rising from their chairs.

Cut their pay and send them home. I believe it would dignify Congress, shrink the federal government, and be the most important first step we could take toward the new promise of American life. I also believe, by the way, that this would be the surest way for Newt Gingrich to become the Speaker of the House. Newt and his colleagues are going to stand on the Capitol steps on September 27th and say what a Republican agenda will be in hopes that the people of the country will put them in charge by January. I think a one-item agenda would do it. If they would stand up and say, "Elect us. We'll cut our pay in half and send ourselves home for half a year, take a real job and work alongside you," they would be members of a Republican Congress in January.

Send the Bureaucracy Home, Too

Sending the Congress home deals with only one train that needs to be turned around and sent off in the opposite direction. So that we don't create imbalances in our system of government, we should send home chunks of the federal bureaucracy as well.

Senator Nancy Kassebaum's welfare proposal would be a good place to start. While everyone else seems to think the problems of welfare all across America can be solved from Washington, she proposes sending Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Food Stamps, and the Women, Infants and Children program back to the states along with the money to pay for them. That is \$41 billion that states could decide what to do with. In exchange, the federal government would take over the states' share of Medicaid, which is plagued with problems that come from having two masters instead of just one. This is the one welfare reform proposal that would work.

What would happen with welfare? You would have all sorts of ideas and approaches springing up. I am certain Reverend Henry Delaney would know just what to do with that welfare money on 32nd Street in Savannah. And so would the Mayor of Henning. So would Father Hill and the Cherokee Chief I visited. So would most communities across this country.

Another obvious candidate for being sent home is job training. There are about 90 federal job training programs, spending about \$25 billion. Rep. Bill Zeliff of New Hampshire believes most of these should be transferred to state and community and private sector control. He is right. Washington seems to have forgotten that the best training for work is work. Our national leadership spews out this invective that "entry level" jobs are demeaning. When I came along, entry level jobs were something you got patted on the back for doing. If you went to work sweeping or washing or waiting tables, you didn't have some Cabinet Secretary in Washington saying the country's going down the drain because everybody is doing entry level jobs. We were encouraged to do that, to sweep the store and dream of owning the store one day. That is how we learned to work.

We should also send home 150 federal elementary and secondary education programs that spend about \$15 billion each year. Governor Voinovich of Ohio says his superintendents spend half their time filling out forms to get federal money that comprises 5 or 6 percent of their local school budgets. Parents and communities, not Washington, can do a better job deciding what's best for our children's future.

In choosing the strategies that are most likely to succeed in helping to send Washington home, high on the list also should go:

- ✓ **Term limits;**
- ✓ **A balanced budget amendment;**
- ✓ **Line-item veto for the President;**
- ✓ **A systematic review of the rule-making authority of federal boards and agencies;**
- ✓ **The election of a President who will veto legislation that imposes costs on state and local governments without paying for it.**
- ✓ **Considering whether, in this telecommunications age, some of the federal departments and agencies might best be relocated outside the Beltway.**

Focus the Presidency

We should not ignore the Presidency as we consider how to roll back the influence of the government in Washington, D.C. This is a topic that deserves an entire discussion of its own, but let me briefly offer a few thoughts.

The Presidency is the most unique and valuable institution our country has in a time of great change. More than any other institution, it can help us see who we are and where we are going and what we need to do to get there. It can set an agenda, make things happen. We ought to employ the Presidency in a more focused way.

When I became governor, a friend of mine gave me a book by Lyndon Johnson's former press secretary, George Reedy, called *The Twilight of the Presidency*. In it I found a definition of the Presidency that I thought also applied to the governorship, and so I used it for eight years.

Reedy wrote that aside from serving as commander in chief, what a President ought to do is three things: first, see the few most urgent needs facing the country; second, develop a strategy for dealing with each need; and third, persuade at least half the people he is right. That's good advice. And we should get the Presidency back into the position where that's what the President is trying to do.

It means first tending to responsibilities as commander in chief. In Baton Rouge, someone asked me what advice I would give President Clinton if he were suddenly to walk in the door. We had been talking about welfare, crime, schools, and jobs. I said this: "I would respectfully suggest to the President that he assemble around him a team of men and women who know the world, understand national security and foreign policy issues, understand when to project our force and when not to. Then listen to their advice, make a decision, support the decision, and see it through to the end."

It is not so unusual to have a President who doesn't know everything about the world going in. It is unusual to have one who doesn't seem to know anybody else who does.

Focusing the Presidency means dispelling this notion that there can be a domestic President. There is no such thing. Everything about this world is too much intertwined. The President is the one American who can do the most to untangle it for all of us. George Shultz says that Ronald Reagan's most important act in foreign policy in his early years was the firing of the air traffic controllers. President Reagan said, "If you violate your oath, you will be fired." They did, and he did—and it sent a clear message to Qadhafi and people all around the world. Secretary of State Shultz said, "It made my job much easier."

Focusing the Presidency also means promising to do less for people through federal programs, while providing leadership to help people do for themselves more of what needs to be done. Margaret Thatcher used to talk about the “nanny state,” and I believe the President should not act or be expected to act like the nation’s nanny.

Focused presidential leadership would be useful right now in helping us as a country set some clear limits, both about our role in the world and our role at home. What we *don’t* do can be as much an affirmation of policy as what we do do. And we haven’t really come to terms with that. What we *don’t* try to do from Washington, D.C., about crime in Savannah is policy. Every time we make a federal decision about what happens in a classroom, it takes away from the teacher, the parent, and the community the freedom to make that decision for themselves. If we do not invade Haiti, that is just as important a part of our policy—and part of a set of clear objectives—as was invading Kuwait.

The Challenge

Earlier this year, we began at the Hudson Institute a project, called the New Promise of American Life, to examine how we might roll back the expansion of the federal government that Croly helped spark 80 years ago.

I would hope that Heritage and others might work with us to find chunks of the government in Washington that can be sent home, as long as Congress is going to be home more, and as long as the President is going to concentrate more of the Presidency on the most urgent needs facing the country. That would be step one toward renewing the promise of American life.

The second step, then, is probably more difficult. It involves illustrating what happens with welfare, about schools, about safe streets if the federal government takes less of a role and communities have more in their hands. Such an approach represents a very unsatisfying set of answers for any disciple of Herbert Croly, because unless we have a federal program or a Washington, D.C., response, we’re considered to be doing nothing.

I wish some of the people who feel that way had a chance to be with me these past few weeks and to see Henry Delaney on 32nd Street in Savannah. I wish they could have been with me on my visit with Reuben Greenberg, the police chief of Charleston, South Carolina, who has cut serious crime by very simple actions, like putting four police officers on the street to take to school any child under age 17 who is walking the street during school hours, or to take home any child under age 17 who is anywhere outside the home after midnight. Every school board ought to visit Becci Bookner, the teacher in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, who has helped to open the public schools 12 hours a day all year with academic programs at no extra cost to the taxpayer.

Most of the answers to the problems that trouble must spring up from the families and communities of America. The new promise of American life comes from communities. America had communities before it had a central government. The greatness of our country has always come from communities, and not from reinventing America in Washington, D.C.

Conclusion

Driving through Southwest Missouri, I visited the homeplace of Albert E. Brumley. If you grew up anywhere in the South or Southwest, you grew up listening to Albert E. Brumley’s gospel songs.

He was chopping cotton in a hot Missouri sun in the late 1920s, thinking there has to be something better than this, when he thought of his first gospel song, “I’ll Fly Away.” “I’ll Fly Away” is played on every gospel station in the country and on most country stations almost every day. I

spent several hours visiting with Brumley's sons, playing the piano, singing his songs. He wrote 1,000 of them.

Albert's son Bill said, "I'll Fly Away" was published in 1932. I think the reason it went so big was because those were hard times." And then he said, "These are hard times, too, but in a different way."

These are hard times. It is harder to be a parent, a teacher, a student, a policeman, a nurse. It seems harder to start a business, to find and keep a job. It is not easy to be a good political leader in such a troubled, cynical time. Despite all the impressive national statistics that can be mustered up, we are grumpy, troubled, and off track. One huge reason is that the government in Washington is suffocating so much of what we need to do. It has become a dead weight on our future.

If we can push the government out of the way, then we will at least be free to do something ourselves about the drift of our country away from principles that made it great to begin with and to repair institutions we have always depended upon—the family, the neighborhood, the church, the school—that have become broken. These are the greatest challenges we face in these hard times.

Cut their pay and send them home may be a catchy phrase, but it is a catchy phrase for a serious idea. It's more than a bumper sticker. It's a plan to cut back on Washington's meddling—and to encourage community answers to community problems. It should become the centerpiece for a set of proposals that will send a good part of the government in Washington, D.C., home. It is probably the tip of the iceberg in the 1990s. It could help to give America a Republican national government by 1996. Most important, it is the surest first step toward the new promise of American life.

