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Less from  
Washington,  
More from Us:  
A Citizenship  
Agenda for a  
Rising, Shining  
America

*By Lamar Alexander*



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# Less from Washington, More from Us: A Citizenship Agenda for A Rising, Shining America

By Lamar Alexander

## A Wake-Up Call

In only nine weeks, we will know who Republicans will nominate to be the first President of the next century. This year, the race is a 40-yard dash. Washington is already telling us to expect a Dole-Clinton contest, a debate about what is going on in Washington, and then another Clinton presidency. I am here today to challenge the Washington wisdom and deliver a wake-up call to the Republican Party.

Republicans know in our hearts that we cannot defeat Bill Clinton with a message that is only about cutting government in Washington. Yet, so far, that is all the debate has been about: more or less government, more or less spending, CBO numbers versus OMB numbers, a Senate bill versus a House bill. The public is being cheated out of the most important conversation. The debate we should be having is beyond the budget.

It is about ending 60 years of the New Deal/Great Society mentality that has looked to government to meet every social need. It is about ending the equation between compassion and government spending. It requires the courage to stand up and say this equation is a lie, it is false, and it is hurting people. Most important, the debate we should be having is about creating a new understanding of the respective roles of citizens, communities, and government.

Most Americans in the real world are living lives beset by anxiety and fear; the breakdown of our families, neighborhoods, and schools; and the upheaval brought about by the computer age and disappearing jobs. Hearing and watching this dance in Washington, they must be wondering, "Is that all there is?" Does everyone there wear green eyeshades, talk about OMBs and CBOs, believe that the solution for every problem involves getting some bill out of a subcommittee? Is there nobody willing to talk with us about what kind of America we will have in the year 2000 and beyond, and how we're going to get there? If the coming presidential campaign is about government rather than citizenship, about budget bills rather than communities, about what goes on in Congress rather than what goes on in our neighborhoods, churches, schools, and families, and Republicans offer no more vision than what is provided in their charts, then the prospects are indeed bleak for 1996. The combination of a President Clinton and a Speaker Gephardt is a nightmare we don't want to wake up to on November 5. After all, we should not forget that 1928 was the last time a Republican Congress was re-elected. 1994 was a realigning election, but how secure is the realignment?

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We already have a good idea of what the President's re-election strategy is. Clinton will run as a caring visionary offering adult supervision for the excesses of the Republican revolution. So we cannot defeat Bill Clinton tactically. We have to defeat him by giving the electorate a clear choice of two visions of America: a vision of an America that works, family by family, community by community, versus an America of group rights, declining opportunities, and children trapped in schools where they can't learn.

Here's the truth: Charts and graphs, even when they score the right economic points, will never win the larger debate. Big government, by itself, did not create all the problems we have today, and less government, by itself, will not solve those problems. Which is why we need to focus in a positive way on where we are going. It may be more fun to explain what's wrong with the Great Society programs and the welfare state we want to dismantle, but we have both a moral and strategic imperative to do more than that: We need to paint a clear picture of the kind of America we want to see.

My purpose today is to invite you to join me in setting a different agenda for the Republican presidential contest:

- ✓ **To move** the debate outside Washington, D.C., and beyond the budget.
- ✓ **To capture** the moral high ground, without which no party can be a majority party.
- ✓ **To paint** a picture of our country's future that provides voters with a real choice.
- ✓ **To offer** a New Promise of American Life that depends upon expecting less from Washington and more from ourselves, with the emphasis on more from ourselves.

## **A Vision Contest**

On my walk across New Hampshire, I came across a lady taking a break from her work at a shoe factory in Manchester. I stuck out my hand and said, "I'm Lamar Alexander, and I'd like to be your next President."

The lady looked at me and at my red and black shirt and said, a little alarmed, "That's all we need. Another President!"

Given the President we've got, I can understand how the lady feels. At a time when our greatest problem is teaching our children the difference between right and wrong, Bill Clinton is exactly the wrong man to have in the White House as President of the United States of America.

That doesn't mean he won't talk a good game. He gets up on both sides of the bed every morning. He is disappointing because he lacks a vision, but he is dangerous because he can fake a vision. And the American people are hungry for a vision contest about what kind of country we will have in the year 2000 and beyond.

We must not present them with a choice between a Democratic President faking a vision and a Republican nominee who is too decent to fake one. President Clinton is rejoicing, and Speaker Gephardt is measuring his new office.

Let me ask you to imagine what will happen next October. There will be a presidential debate. Forty million Americans will be watching. We know what Bill Clinton will do. Someone will ask him a question. He'll move out from behind the podium and walk over to the questioner. He feels the questioner's pain. He gives a very good answer. If the Republican nominee's response is to start talking about how to get a bill out of a subcommittee, or



OMB's and CBO's, Bill Clinton will be President and Dick Gephardt will be ready to take the Speaker's chair.

That is why the Republican Party needs a wake-up call.

We must nominate someone who can paint a picture of the future based upon conservative principles that is brighter and more compelling than the picture Bill Clinton paints based upon whatever he woke up believing that day.

It is time for a new generation of leadership.

Losing the White House, losing the House of Representatives—losses that would have been laughed at a few months ago—are, all of a sudden, part of the Republican conversation. There is a surprising number of Republicans who make themselves feel better by assuming that even if Bill Clinton is re-elected, Newt Gingrich will continue moving the revolution forward as Speaker of the House.

But where is it written in stone that Newt Gingrich will be Speaker in 1997? The upcoming race will be a referendum on the Republican agenda. Our nominee's job will be to persuade more than half of America that the surest course into the new century is with a Republican government: a Republican President and a Republican Congress.

If the nominee is unable to articulate the vision of the revolution, he will not only fail to win the White House, but could drag others to defeat with him, putting the House and the revolution itself at risk. With the increase we have seen in straight ticket voting in the last few elections, this prospect is now more likely than ever.

Whether Republicans like it or not, Bill Clinton will make the 1996 election about principles and values—he already is doing so—not just about policy. So the standard bearer of our party had better be a leader who can articulate both the party's vision and the complete message of the Republican revolution.

I am the only candidate with a realistic chance of winning the nomination who can defeat President Clinton by pitting against his campaign rhetoric a true vision of the country's future that can capture not only the minds, but the hearts of the American people.

## **A Rising, Shining America**

The goal of the Republican revolution is not just to balance the budget, but to renew our institutions and rebuild America.

This is the America I can see in the next century:

- ☛ An America in which parents can drop their children off at school in the morning, confident that they will be safe and that they will learn.
- ☛ An America in which you are not afraid to take a walk in your own neighborhood after dark.
- ☛ An America in which the number of abortions and divorces is declining, where families stick together, and fathers stick around.
- ☛ An America with a 4 percent home mortgage rate so that a working family can afford its home and where there's a good new job for every job that disappears.
- ☛ An America strong enough to defend itself and wise enough not to become involved in anyone else's civil war unless we are prepared to pick one side and win the war.

- ☞ An America in which our first thought about each other is something other than the color of our skin.
- ☞ An America where we are not ashamed but proud to call ourselves “One Nation Under God.”
- ☞ An America where instead of constant complaining about what is on TV, we can almost hear millions of TVs clicking off as families spend more time together and parents actually raise their children.

## **The New Promise of American Life: Changing the Way We Think**

To build the good society in the new century, we must change dramatically our thinking about how we get there. For most of this last century, we have measured our progress by a beautiful idea called the promise of American life: the idea that, in America, tomorrow will be better than today and that every single one of us will have an opportunity to be a part of that future. But whenever we have said “We must do more” to extend the promise of American life to more people, “we” has always meant “Washington.” More from Washington has been the thinking that has dominated our civic life since the New Deal and the Great Society. The failures that have resulted from this kind of thinking are now too obvious to ignore. Republicans have successfully made the case against this view of government. We have convinced the public that they need less government in their lives. But less government is only half the equation. To move ahead, to create a new agenda for our party and for our country, we need to talk about the other half of the equation: Less from Washington has to go hand in hand with more from ourselves.

The Republican revolution, after all, was never just about dismantling Washington, D.C. That was a necessary step, but only a first step. What the revolution is also about is making it easier for Americans to rebuild those institutions that bind us together: the family, the neighborhood, the church, the synagogue, the school, and the community. And, finally, it is about putting those institutions to work.

That is the central message of my campaign. And I believe it must be the heart of the Republican agenda leading to November. The Clinton re-election strategy is predicated on the idea of a Republican Party that talks only of tearing things down and taking things away. We must not fall into his trap, not only because this is the way to lose, but, more important, because this would be a betrayal of our responsibility to articulate a positive vision for rebuilding America.

Less from Washington and more from ourselves is a difficult message, and an inconvenient one. But it is time to tell the truth. The answers to many of our most serious problems are not in legislative solutions and are not in Washington, D.C. And any political leader who shrinks from speaking this truth does not deserve the nomination of the party of the revolution.

In 1994, I edited, together with Checker Finn, a book of essays entitled *The New Promise of American Life*. Our purpose was to present a picture of what America would look like if we reversed our thinking and moved more responsibility out of Washington. This past fall I published a book, *We Know What To Do*, a collection of stories of the most interesting men and women I met on an eight-week drive across America. All of these are examples of my belief that we know exactly what to do and thousands are already doing it: Father Jerry Hill, who runs the Austin Street Shelter in Dallas; Rev. Henry Delaney, a 500-pound minister who took back an inner-city street in Savannah; the police chief of Charleston, Reuben Greenberg; Sister Jennie and her Puente Learning Center in Los Angeles. Their stories il-

lustrate how to replace the current failed systems, and they demonstrate that it takes a bigger heart to say “I will help you” than “I will lobby the government to help you.”

## **Less from Washington, More from Ourselves: A Citizenship Agenda**

Often, when I am in Washington, I am asked why I would want to come here as President if I simply want to send everything back home. My answer is that I am not seeking the job of President of Washington, D.C. I want to be President of the whole country.

Less from Washington and more from us is not a Washington message, of course. But it is the theme that, as President, will define my agenda, guide my thinking, and help a Republican administration focus on the most important issues: citizenship, personal responsibility, and giving Americans more control over their own lives. We need to stop studying the problems and start solving them. We need a sense of urgency that permeates what we do today, and every day, because so much is at stake. We need a President who is determined enough, even stubborn enough, not to let special interests and defenders of the failed status quo get in the way of a citizenship agenda that will eliminate the obstacles standing between the American people and all that they can be—for themselves, for their families, and for their communities. I intend to throw myself into the fulfillment of this agenda with everything I have, tolerating no institutional excuses or bureaucratic delays.

Here is what I would do as first President of the next century to give us less from Washington.

**An Entrepreneurial Economy and Vouchers for Job Training.** My first goal would be to remove the barriers that stand in the way of unleashing entrepreneurial creativity and community action. I will know I have succeeded when creating a new job becomes easier than getting an unemployment check. I would focus on the job spigot instead of the job drain, so that every year we would create enough new jobs to replace the ones we are losing. By entirely abolishing the capital gains tax and drastically simplifying our tax code, and by turning the \$25 billion in federal job training programs into job training vouchers for workers changing jobs, we would transform a bureaucratic and stifling industrial age environment into one that is flexible and responsive to the changing needs of an America on the threshold of a new century.

I am comfortable talking about these ideas because I’ve done what I think every politician should be forced to do: lived under the rules I helped create. In 1987, after I left the governor’s office in Tennessee, I helped start a company that today employs 1,200 people. So I know what is involved in starting a new business. And I know what removing Washington’s barriers would do to encourage others to start new businesses of their own.

**A GI Bill for Kids.** But nothing will change in this country until we change an educational system that keeps poor children trapped in failed schools where they can’t learn and from which they cannot escape. In the 1960s, George Wallace stood in the courthouse door telling the black children of Alabama they could not get in. Today, the teachers’ unions and politicians beholden to them are standing in the school doors telling poor children they cannot get out.

Fighting this opposition will be one of our toughest challenges. I know. I fought the teachers’ union in Tennessee for a year and a half in order to pay teachers more for teaching well. They beat me once, but I came back and succeeded. I am prepared to do it again. So step number one is to abolish the U.S. Department of Education and put responsibility for education back where it belongs, in the families and in the classrooms. And to make it easier for middle- and low-income parents to have a choice about where their children go to

school, I would introduce a \$1 billion GI Bill for Kids that would provide scholarships for children who need them.

**Put Welfare Decisions in the Hands of Citizens.** In the area of welfare, there is widespread consensus that it needs to be reformed. Walking in New Hampshire, I met a couple that had just returned from the welfare office, where they were encouraged to separate in order to get higher welfare benefits. This is an example of the compassion by bureaucracy that has undermined personal responsibility and our social responsibility for those in need. Ending welfare as an entitlement is a first step, but Congress has still ended up with a bill that runs more than 800 pages full of rules and regulations. Less from Washington and more from us means going beyond block grants and ending entirely Washington's involvement in caring for those in need.

Giving communities and individuals a real stake in how we help the poor means keeping the money that is now sent to Washington at home and letting communities create their own nonprofit corporations so they can decide how to help people in need. We also should have a tax credit, as Senator Coats has suggested, so that Americans can directly support local charities instead of handing the money over to the federal tax collector.

**Cut Their Pay and Send Them Home.** But it is very hard to change the bankrupt culture of Washington if you are the culture of Washington. That is why we need a part-time citizen Congress. The best way for Congress to understand the citizenship agenda is to begin practicing it by spending less time in Washington and more time in their communities. I would cut the pay of Congress in half and send them home for half the year. Even a Republican Congress would be a better Congress if it were a part-time citizen Congress. To accelerate this fundamental change in our political system, I would lead the national call for term limits and an end to the million dollar pensions that reward members of Congress for making politics a lifetime career.

## What Would America Look Like?

Earlier this week, the *New York Times* published a funny piece about my red and black plaid shirt. The *Times* pointed out that in many places, the shirt is better known than I am. That shirt, which I wore as I walked across Tennessee in 1978, and which I have worn as I walked across New Hampshire this summer, has been the butt of many jokes. But there is a serious point I am trying to make with my plaid shirt, too.

It stands for the folks I've been talking to for the past two years in neighborhoods, churches, schools, and communities from one end of our nation to the other. I've found far more wisdom in the plaid shirts of America than in all the empty suits in Washington. The folks in plaid shirts understand what's wrong with America, and more important, they know what to do to fix it.

I am often asked: After these changes come about, who would help the poor? Who would teach the children who need the most help? Who would help the homeless?

Across America, I've seen firsthand what works. It is Americans in their everyday lives, doing extraordinary things in suburbs as well as in the trenches of our inner cities, giving us a glimpse of what America could look like.

- ◆ **In Dallas**, Father Jerry Hill. Father Hill was outraged that the federal government was paying \$446 a month to drug addicts who then wanted to come into his shelter. "How can I help them," he says, "when they have that kind of support for their dependency?"



- ◆ **In Savannah**, Rev. Henry Delaney. “Why don’t they ask me about welfare?” he said to me. “I work every day with people who need help. I know what to do.”
- ◆ **In Charleston**, Police Chief Reuben Greenberg. He fought for two years for permission to throw known crack dealers out of housing projects so that single mothers who were following the law could live there in safety.
- ◆ **In Milwaukee**, the remarkable people who helped give low-income parents a voucher so that their children would not be stuck in a bad school. When the courts stopped the program Governor Thompson had instituted just after the school year had begun, the community rushed to its defense. There was an emergency campaign which raised \$1.8 million to send almost 5,000 children from poor families to the private schools of their parents’ choosing—complete with a talk show host offering to match up to \$1,000 in donations with his own funds, and an elderly couple celebrating 52 years of marriage by sending in the \$50 they had set aside for an anniversary present. Bill Bennett and I visited these schools in September, and what we saw were parents and teachers who, despite the court order and despite the media attention, wanted to get the best education they could for their children. They had been given an opportunity to make decisions for themselves and their children, to act as involved citizens, and they were seizing it.

These stories are not isolated examples. They are the American way of life. They are the tinder for a prairie fire of personal and social responsibility that, with lots of encouragement, could sweep across our country.

The next President needs to be a little bit of a preacher willing to say the most important words the first President of the next century can say: We should spend less time trying to figure out what the government owes us and who to blame for what goes wrong and more time accepting personal responsibility for the consequences of our own actions.

If our children are running around the streets where we live, we should go get them. If they are not learning to read, we should read to them. My first library card came from my mother, not from the President of the United States. If the television is trash, we should turn it off. If the babies in a Detroit hospital are born already exposed to cocaine because their mothers are crack addicts, we can shoot down a drug plane and appoint a new czar, but in the end, the problem is not in Washington; it is in Detroit.

A few months ago, I visited Mt. Dora, a wonderful little community in Florida. As I was leaving, a reporter told me an eighth grader had murdered a classmate. The reporter then asked me what I would do about that as President. The answer a Senator might give is: Pass a federal law against guns in schools. But I replied: The answer is not in Washington; the answer is in Mt. Dora. Only the families, neighborhoods, churches, and schools of Mt. Dora can keep a tragedy like that from happening again.

## **The Role of the Presidency**

Earlier I mentioned how I have been asked why I would want to come to Washington to serve as President if I think we should move so much out of Washington. To ask this question is to fundamentally misunderstand the role of the presidency. We seem to be forgetting what the job of the President actually is. The President is the nation’s agenda setter. A President has the power to move a crisis to the center of the public debate and to national attention, and to energize millions of Americans to deliver the solutions.

But in my administration, the opportunity to educate, persuade, and motivate through the megaphone that our Constitution and the TV age have given the President will be devoted to my citizenship agenda.

When I say I am an outsider, it is not because I don't know Washington, but because I know unequivocally that the solutions are outside Washington. I don't trust Washington solutions, and I don't trust Washington predictions.

The majority of Republican primary voters are looking for a new generation of leadership that will build on the beginnings of the Republican revolution and carry it forward to the next century. I believe I will be that candidate.

The choice voters will face, as I said at the outset of this speech, is a Republican Party that persists in speaking only about legislation and budgets versus a Republican Party that shifts the agenda to one of citizens, communities, families, churches, synagogues, and schools. Once that candidate, who can carry the citizenship agenda, has been brought to the forefront, the alternative will suddenly become clear, and the defining political debate will be heard not just on weekend talk shows, but in front of millions of voters in Iowa, New Hampshire, throughout New England, across the South and the rest of the country.

I intend to be that alternative because I will advance what I think is the right agenda and the winning agenda for the Republican future.

So the Republican nominating process of 1996 really begins this week. It is a contest about where the country will go and who can paint the most compelling picture of its future. My job—our job—is to ensure that voters have the right choice in that contest so that, three months from now, we are setting the agenda rather than reacting defensively to an agenda set by Bill Clinton. And ten months from now, if we are the ones who set the agenda, we will have a truly historic opportunity to lead the Republican revolution into the next century.

