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Off With the Limits:
What I Learned About
Money and Politics
When I Ran for President

By Lamar Alexander



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Off With the Limits: What I Learned About Money and Politics When I Ran for President

By Lamar Alexander

On March 3, one day after the disastrous—for me—South Carolina primary and three days before I withdrew from the presidential race, I attended Sunday services at the Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. The Rev. Frank Harrington preached about how Joshua, after a great victory at the Battle of Jericho, had been surprised and humiliated in the battle of A'i—so humiliated that Joshua renamed A'i the “Valley of Calamity.” He wanted his warriors always to remember the lessons of what had happened there.

Walking out after the service, I asked Rev. Harrington, “Was the point that I should rename South Carolina the ‘Valley of Calamity?’”

“No,” he said, “the point is, you must learn lessons from your defeat—and then pick yourself up and go on.”

The voters, in their wisdom, have given me a defeat, and now several weeks to reflect upon its lessons. The Heritage Foundation has invited me today to talk about one of those lessons: the influence of money on the race for the presidency. While my wounds are fresh, here is my view: The so-called campaign reformers are selling the American people a real bill of goods on this one. They are saying that limits on what individuals can give to presidential campaigns and on what candidates can spend will reduce the influence of money and create a better democracy.

In fact, such limits do precisely the reverse. We now have 22 years of experience with them. Limits have increased the influence of money and are dangerous to democracy. It is the law of unintended consequences operating in all of its glory. Instead of adding more limits, we should take the limits off and rely on full disclosure to discourage corruption.

The limits on giving and spending for a presidential campaign were well-intentioned, placed into federal law after Watergate. Corporations can't give at all; political action committees may give up to \$5,000; and individuals may give up to \$1,000 during the primaries (the government pays for the general election). In addition, there are limits on what a candidate may spend in each state primary and a ceiling on spending for the entire primary. The Federal Election Commission enforces all of this.

The limits were designed to make things better for you, the average voter, so let's look at what they have done. As a result of these limits:

- ✗ You are more likely to see a comet than meet a presidential candidate, unless you have \$1,000—or live in Iowa or New Hampshire;
- ✗ You have fewer choices of candidates;
- ✗ The primary campaigns start before you care and end before you have a chance to vote;

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- ✗ You are less likely to hear the candidates' messages;
- ✗ Your nominee is more likely to be someone already holding office, rather than an insurgent;
- ✗ More of your choices are among candidates who are rich enough to spend their own money; and
- ✗ Washington, D.C., has more to say about who the nominee is and you have less.

In short, the federal limits on giving and spending during elections are turning presidential races into playgrounds for the rich, the already famous, and the Washington-based, and are helping to deprive most Americans of the opportunity to cast a meaningful vote.

When we create a system for picking Presidents, I believe our objectives should be these:

- ✓ We should want the largest number of good candidates.
- ✓ We should want a good opportunity to hear what they have to say.
- ✓ All of us, if possible, want the opportunity to cast a meaningful vote.

If this is also your set of objectives, then here is my remedy: Off with the limits. Off with the limits on individual contributions. Off with the spending limits. Require maximum disclosure. Open up the system. Let the candidates speak. Let us vote.

Three Disclaimers

Before you think it, let me say it:

First, I am not here to wallow in gloom. In fact, I come away from the campaign more optimistic, not less. I would do it again in a minute. I believe even more that there is very little wrong with our country that more jobs, better schools, and stronger families won't fix.

Second, I believe I can make these remarks in the spirit of a gracious loser. That is made easier because our process produced a nominee whom I respect, who is my friend, and who I will be proud to call my President. Under any process, Bob Dole was our party's most likely nominee this year. (I will confess that my determination to be a gracious loser is tested about once a week when I remember what another defeated Tennessean, Davy Crockett, once said. Congressman Crockett strode to the courthouse steps, faced the voters who had just turned him out of office, and said what every defeated candidate has always wanted to say to such voters: "I'm going to Texas and you can go to hell!")

Finally, I am not here to complain because Steve Forbes spent \$33 million of his own wealth on his presidential campaign. I believe the First Amendment to our Constitution gives Mr. Forbes the right to spend his money to advance his views. The Rockefellers and Perots and Forbeses and du Ponts all have made valuable contributions to our public life. I hope they continue to do so. What I object to, as I will discuss, is letting them spend all they want and then putting limits on the rest of us.

What I am arguing—that it is wrong to put limits on giving and spending—runs smack in the face of what we have been hearing ever since Watergate. So let me take my points one by one. What I have to contribute is a view from the inside. I will stick to my impressions and stories from the road and let scholars here at Heritage and elsewhere compile the statistics and perform the analysis.

X Because of the limits, you're more likely to see a comet than meet a presidential candidate, unless you have \$1,000—or live in Iowa and New Hampshire.

Of course, not everybody wants to meet a presidential candidate. Walking across New Hampshire, I met a woman taking a work break outside a shoe factory in Manchester. I stuck out my hand and said, "I'm Lamar Alexander. I'd like to be your next President." She looked at me, and at my red and black shirt, and said with disgust, "That's all we need. Another President!" Congressman Mo Udall used to tell about walking into a barber shop. "I'm Mo Udall, running for President," he said. "Yeah, I know," the barber replied. "We were just laughing about that yesterday."

But if you are one of those persons who would actually like to meet and size up someone who might be your President, get your wallet ready because the \$1,000 limit on giving forces candidates to spend most of their time with people who can give \$1,000. As with many federal laws, these limits have done just exactly the opposite of what they were intended to do. Limits have increased the influence of money on the candidates.

For example, to raise \$10 million in 1995 for the Alexander for President campaign, I traveled to 250 fund-raising events. Now, think about this. This is about one event per campaign day. This took 70 percent of all my time. As a result, I became unusually well acquainted with a great many good Americans capable of giving \$1,000 (who probably represent a cross section of about one percent of all the people in the country). Wouldn't I have been a better candidate, and the country better off had I been elected, if I had spent more time traveling around America and visiting allies abroad? (I actually did this during 1994, driving 8,800 miles across America and spending two months overseas. This was when I was not spending most of my time meeting nice people who could give me \$1,000.)

X Because of the limits, you have fewer choices for President.

This is because, in the real world, a \$1,000 limit on gifts makes fund-raising so difficult that it discourages most candidates. I will now wave my own red flag: It is important not to get carried away with this argument. The difficulty of raising money is sometimes just an excuse. There are other more compelling reasons not to run for President.

For example, I recall in November of 1995, when Colin Powell was on the cover of the news magazines and his approval rating in the polls was, literally, higher than the Pope's—and I was struggling to secure a paragraph in the Keokuk, Iowa, daily—I was driving to the airport after a New York fund-raiser with a former associate of General Powell's. The unavoidable question arose, "Will Colin run?" The former associate answered, "I don't know. But I can tell you two things about General Powell. One is, he makes rational decisions. Two is, he doesn't like uncertainty." I knew from that moment that, if that were true, there was no chance whatsoever Colin would be a candidate. Running for President is not a rational decision. It is instinctive. It is a passion with a purpose. And it is most surely a symphony in uncertainty. That is why I am so surprised that so many have such a hard time taking Colin Powell at his word, that he simply doesn't want to do it. Most people don't. They don't want the job, or they are afraid they can't win, or more and more they are unwilling to expose themselves and their families to the scrutiny that comes with the candidacy.

Having said all of that, it is still true that the prospect of trying to raise \$20 million from contributions of \$1,000 or less makes the race much less attractive and often impossible for many good candidates. In 1995, Bill Bennett told me he didn't know how to raise that kind of money. Jack Kemp said he knew how but didn't want to. Dan Quayle

and Dick Cheney discovered it would have been very hard even for a former Vice President and a former Defense Secretary; they both decided not to become candidates.

You might have wondered this year, where have all the governors gone? I don't think I have ever met a governor who didn't think he or she would make an excellent President. Seventeen of our Presidents have been governors. There are today 32 Republican governors. One might argue (and I will confess that I tried out this argument a few hundred times during 1995) that the natural presidential partner for our strong Republican congressional leaders would have been the best of our Republican governors.

But at the end of 1995, not one sitting Republican governor was in the race. Carroll Campbell, Tommy Thompson, and Bill Weld, perhaps others, had considered it and drawn back, privately saying, "I can't raise the money." Even the governor of California, Pete Wilson—who by my calculation is governor of five percent of all the money in the world—could not raise enough money. So, for Republicans, 1995 turned out to be the year of the "money primary."

This is how it worked. There were, in the end, only four of us who could find a way to raise enough money to run for President. We all had certain advantages. For example, a contribution to Bob Dole was also a contribution to the respected Senate majority leader. Phil Gramm had worked relentlessly for six years as chairman of the Senate Republican Campaign Committee to build a list of 83,000 names and a \$5 million campaign kitty, which he then transferred to his presidential account—a perfectly legal loophole, but one which was unavailable to the governors or others not holding office. Pat Buchanan was able to depend on direct mail for smaller contributions because it was his second race, he had been on network television for 15 years, and he took, shall we say, especially noisy positions.

The Alexander campaign had some advantages, too: exceptional national leadership and strong support at home. Six of the last seven Republican national finance chairs chaired our fund-raising. We began with a \$2 million dinner in Nashville on March 6, 1995, and raised \$5.2 million in 21 events during the next six weeks. At the end of 1995, the three zip codes in America which had contributed the most to presidential campaigns were all in Nashville. By the time I withdrew, we had raised nearly \$13 million from 26,000 contributors, 8,800 of whom had given \$1,000. (We received another \$4 million from federal matching funds.)

But after the initial \$5.2 million spurt, it became much harder for us. I was traveling to 20 events per month to raise \$500,000. This created logistical adventures of Desert Storm proportions. On one day, I flew from Nashville to Colorado Springs to Denver for fund-raisers and then on to Phoenix to be ready for an early morning breakfast. To collect \$20,000 during the crucial week before the Iowa caucus, I "dropped by" Knoxville, Tennessee, on the way from New Hampshire to Iowa. To raise another \$30,000, I flew from Sioux City, Iowa, to San Juan, Puerto Rico, one Sunday in December. By the last four days of the New Hampshire primary, we were running on empty except for the money set aside for debts, audit, and winding down.

Then, when I placed a strong third in the Iowa caucus on February 12, the money dam broke. Beginning three days after Iowa, five days before the New Hampshire primary, contributions started rolling in to our Nashville headquarters at the rate of \$100,000 a day without events. This continued for every day except Sunday, until I withdrew on March 6. Our once-a-week telephone conference calls sometimes included more than 200 volunteer fund-raisers. But it came too late, for New Hampshire ads had

to be purchased the Friday before the primary on Tuesday. I failed (by 7,000 votes) to overtake Senator Dole. The Republican nomination was decided in the first primary.

X Partly because of the limits, the campaign starts before you care and ends before you have a chance to vote.

Not only did the campaign end early; it started ridiculously early because, it seemed at the time, starting early was the only way to raise the necessary amount of money. In early 1995, Senator Gramm of Texas, flush with his 83,000 names and \$5 million kitty, declared that it would take \$20 million to run for President, that he could raise it and that he doubted many others could, and then sponsored a \$4 million kick-off dinner in Dallas and announced, "Ready cash is a candidate's best friend."

None of the rest of us were about to be left behind. I held my \$2 million dinner in Nashville. Senator Dole jumped in, as did others. Off we went, pounding the streets in 1995 trying to raise money for a race in 1996. It was like trying to stir up a conversation about football in the middle of the NBA playoffs. For me, by mid-summer 1995, it was going something like this interview:

From Washington, D.C., "Inside Politics," Wolf Blitzer (already bored with the long "money primary"): "Governor Alexander, why do the polls show Senator Dole ahead of you 54 to 4 in Iowa?"

From Vermont, in my red and black shirt, Me (already tired of being asked the same question for the 50th time): "Wolf, that's the dumbest question I've ever heard. The reason Senator Dole is ahead of me is that everyone knows him and nobody knows me."

Now, add to the cost of creating such a long campaign the usual costs of fund-raising. A rule of thumb is that it costs 30 cents to raise a dollar. That meant that of the \$10 million we raised in 1995, about \$3.5 million went for fund-raising. Then there is the cost of complying with federal regulations. Another \$1 million of the \$10 million we raised during 1995 went for that. We set aside still another \$500,000 for the campaign audit, which usually takes years. I think you can see where I am heading.

Add the costs of the long campaign to the usual costs of fund-raising and complying with federal rules and, by the time the 1995 money primary was over and the real primary in 1996 was here, the handful of us still standing (except for Mr. Forbes) were running out of money. The Alexander campaign spent \$10 million during 1995, everything we raised, which left us about \$3 million in the bank (counting federal matching funds) at the beginning of 1996. And, by comparison, we were running a bare-bones effort. Senator Gramm had spent \$28 million when he dropped out just before the first primary in mid-February. Senator Dole had spent more than \$30 million by March 1 and, with 39 primaries yet to go, was coming uncomfortably close to the federally imposed primary spending ceiling. Steve Forbes spent \$33 million before he dropped out. I'm not sure whether my friend Pat has dropped out yet or not!

The reason why the Republican nomination was decided in the first primary is not only because limits on giving and spending forced the campaigns to start early. It is also because so many states moved their primaries to an earlier date in an attempt to give their citizens the same privilege Iowa and New Hampshire citizens have: the opportunity to cast a meaningful vote to pick the first President of the new century. This bunching of primaries created a wild roller coaster ride through 38 states in the 25 days after New Hampshire. Ironically, this made New Hampshire even more important.

Here was the law of unintended consequences mischievously at work once again. The money primary became so long and expensive that we all arrived financially exhausted at the real starting line: New Hampshire, which turned out to be the finish line as well. About the time the voters had returned from the refrigerator to settle in and watch the presidential campaign unfold and perhaps even to vote in it the campaign had ended.

X Because of the limits, you are less likely to hear the candidates' message.

This is because limits on giving and spending prevent most candidates from raising enough money to get across their messages, especially if the candidate is relatively unknown at the beginning. Let me offer an example. Yesterday's *Newsweek* contains a column by Meg Greenfield which says this: "The doomed Presidential campaign of Lamar Alexander should tell the Republicans something. It was the quintessential anti-government pitch—complete with an implicit—and often explicit—denial and disavowal of Alexander's career as a government guy. He bombed."

Well, now, this is the stuff of a pretty good debate. Of course, I disagree with Ms. Greenfield. I think my campaign nearly succeeded because I understand that the next President must lead us to expect less from Washington and ask more of ourselves, including our local governmental institutions. Ms. Greenfield's and President Clinton's solution is more from Washington. So let the debate begin.

Ms. Greenfield has her page in *Newsweek*. She is also editorial director for the *Washington Post*. President Clinton has the best forum of all. Their "more from Washington" side of the argument will get plenty of exposure. But what about my "more from us" argument? I made my case in Iowa during 80 visits and walked 100 miles across New Hampshire. I found that in those small meetings I could be persuasive. I also found that nothing much happened in the public opinion polls until I was on television. "Free TV"—the network news—was not of much help (although some local stations were very aggressive). To begin with, the national networks didn't arrive until mid-January when the campaign was nearly over.

The Center for Media and Public Affairs watched all the network newscasts in January and February, ten-and-one-half hours of campaign coverage. The Center found that we nine Republican candidates were allotted 79 minutes total. We were allowed to present our views in seven-second sound bites. The journalists covering us received five times as many minutes of coverage on those same newscasts. What the journalists said about us and our campaigns was more negative than what we candidates said about each other. And more than half the journalists' comments were about the horse race, not the issues. The Freedom Forum, in a remarkable survey of the journalists covering the presidential campaign, found that in 1992, 89 percent had voted for Bill Clinton. A candidate cannot rely on "Free TV" to get his message across. That is why, in our media-drenched society, where things are not important unless they are on TV, a candidate must have money for television to get a message across, and the limits on giving and spending make it difficult for candidates to do that.

This is not just one candidate's lament. Limits on giving and spending are an affront to the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The whole idea of the framers of the Bill of Rights was to keep the government from attempting to limit political debate and criticism: "Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech." In *Buckley v. Valeo*, the Supreme Court acknowledged this and struck down most congressional limits of this sort, but left standing the current provisions because of its worry about "corrup-

tion.” I believe the better antidote to corruption is disclosure. To correct something bad, we have created something worse.

X Because of limits, your nominee is more likely to be an incumbent than an insurgent.

In the real world, insurgents not only need more money than incumbents; they need it early. The *New York Times* reported that two-thirds of voters in New Hampshire made their minds up during the last week before the primary, after the Iowa caucuses. Among those voters, I won with 31 percent. Among the one-third who voted before Iowa, I received six percent. More money, earlier, might have helped get my message across to those early deciders.

Candidates for President who already hold public office have government-paid staffs of policy advisers, PR people, and political administrators. They have name recognition and franking privileges. They have a fund-raising advantage because of their positions of power. If they are in Washington, they have a huge media advantage because that is where the media are. So putting a limit on what all candidates can raise and spend turns out to be a protection policy for some candidates: the ones who already enjoy the perquisites of public office.

This is not just true in federal races. My home state, Tennessee, has just limited contributions to governors’ races to \$500. This is an enormous advantage for our incumbent Republican governor, Don Sundquist. And it virtually guarantees that the only effective candidate against Governor Sundquist when he runs for re-election will be someone who is so rich that he can spend his or her own money—which brings us to the most important point.

X Because of the limits, more of your choices are likely to be rich candidates willing to spend their own money.

This brings us to the major problem with limits on campaign giving and spending: The limits apply to some candidates but not to others. This is because the U.S. Supreme Court has said that the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits Congress from preventing anyone from spending his or her own money on our own campaigns. So the limits apply only to people who aren’t rich enough to spend money on their own campaign.

This creates an absurd advantage for wealthy candidates and a distorted contest for the voter. The first advantage is the obvious: The wealthy candidate has more money to spend. For example, Mr. Forbes spent \$33 million of (mostly) his own money; I spent, with matching funds, about \$16 million of other peoples’ money.

There are two other less obvious advantages. The candidate with his own money spends no time raising it. On the other hand, the candidate raising it is careening from event to event, repeating speeches, meeting nice people who can give \$1,000, wearing himself ragged, and using up 70 percent of his time. By the time you reach the finals the week between Iowa and New Hampshire, you are a candidate for a fitness center, not the presidency.

Finally, there are the state-by-state spending limits, which also help the rich. The federal government has decreed, for example, that a campaign may not spend more than \$1 million in Iowa and \$618,000 in New Hampshire during the presidential primaries. Mr. Forbes, unaffected by these limits, spent \$5 million in Iowa on television. The Alexander campaign spent \$930,000. The AP reported that on the third week before the New Hampshire primary, Mr. Forbes bought 700 ads on one Boston television station (which

covers southern New Hampshire). That week, Senator Dole bought 200 ads on that station. The Alexander campaign: none. Mr. Forbes must have spent \$5 million in Arizona, by my estimates. Local newspapers said it was more than any advertiser had ever spent on local television to introduce a new product. (It must be pointed out that having your own money doesn't automatically mean you win. Mr. Perot is not President. Mr. Forbes came in fourth in both Iowa and New Hampshire. I recall my race for governor in 1978 against a candidate who must have spent \$8 million. I spent \$2 million, enough to win, although I could never have raised \$2 million if there had been limits of \$500 or \$1,000 per contribution.)

What kind of contest is this, having different rules for different contestants? This is like watching the Magic play the Bulls with one team wearing handcuffs. It is certainly not the game the voters paid to see. Think of it this way: Say the fifth grade teacher organizes a contest for class president with water pistols as the weapon of choice; then some kid arrives with a garden hose. Either take away the new kid's garden hose (Bill Bradley suggests a constitutional amendment to limit what individuals can spend on their own campaigns) or give the rest of the fifth graders the freedom to raise and spend enough money to buy their own garden hoses. And if the New Hampshire primary is most of the ball game in presidential primaries, why should state-by-state spending limits keep candidates from defending themselves, even if they use up all their money?

X Because of the limits, Washington has more to say about who the nominee is and you have less.

Talking about Washington these days has gotten to be a sticky business. The rest of the country is tired of Washington, and Washington is tired of hearing about Washington. The rest of the country is becoming more offensive about its feelings, and Washington is becoming more defensive. "Cut their pay and send them home" still makes sense in Sioux City, but they call it nonsense here. One of Washington's most senior journalists told me sadly last year that "This town has grown too big for its britches." I have been coming and going from Washington off and on for 30 years and I believe that is true as well; but to come from outside Washington and say it, and to really believe it, is asking for trouble.

I believe our President must lead us to expect less from Washington and to ask more of ourselves. That is a message less frequently heard in Washington and more difficult to launch from outside Washington. For one thing, this is a media-drenched society, and the message-launchers—the media—are increasingly concentrated here. That will be more true in 2000 and 2004 than it was in 1996. The party fund-raising apparatus is here. The party leadership is here. The think tanks, if you will excuse me, are here. To receive maximum attention to my speech today, I am here. There are all sorts of good people here in Washington, but we of necessity, when we are here, talk mostly with each other.

Reforming the Process

Limits on giving and spending make it less likely that a candidate based outside Washington can succeed. Such candidates, by their experience and skills, may be able to help make Washington more like the rest of America, rather than the rest of America more like Washington. I believe Washington will always be a better place if it is constantly refreshed by the strength of the country outside Washington. The way we pick Presidents today makes that more difficult. Limits are not all that is wrong.

- ✓ **The process should be deregulated.** We should sunset the existing regulations and start over. Fewer rules and full disclosure should be the byword.
- ✓ **Spread out the primaries.** Let Iowa and New Hampshire go first, in February or March, and then arrange all the other primaries on the second Tuesday of the next three months. This would give winners a chance to capitalize on success, voters a chance to digest new faces, and candidates a chance to actually meet voters.
- ✓ **The candidates should be given the opportunity to speak on television more often for themselves.** My even mentioning this runs the same risks Dennis Rodman would take if he suggested some rule changes to a convention of NBA officials. So let me begin with some praise. Some print reporters sat through New Hampshire Lincoln Day dinners in the early stages of the money primary, in 1994 and 1995. C-SPAN and CNN labored valiantly and early. In January and February of 1996, the *New York Times* began printing some long excerpts of the candidates' speeches, and the networks began showing unedited stump speeches. But most of the coverage came late, or was about the horse race, or about candidates who were never going to run. Seventy-nine minutes of network exposure in seven-second sound bites for nine Republican candidates is pathetically little.
- ✓ **There are dangers to early voting.** In a growing number of states, voters may vote a month or two before the election day. According to the Edison exit poll of 1996 New Hampshire primary voters, 40 percent of the voters made their minds up during the last three days before the primary. Those who cast their votes a month earlier were voting in quite a different race.

Other Options For Reform

The first option is suggested by Senator Bill Bradley, whose sporting background must make him especially allergic to contests with one rule for some participants and another rule for others. Senator Bradley would try to create a level playing field by putting limits on everyone, in effect making Mr. Forbes live by the same rules I do.

This takes care of Mr. Forbes and me. But the AFL-CIO will still be able to run \$35 million worth of TV ads attacking particular Republican candidates. The National Association of Wholesaler-Distributors will still be able to run ads slamming President Clinton's product liability veto. The National Restaurant Association will advertise that President Clinton is wrong about the minimum wage. The National Education Association will say I am wrong about school choice. The national political parties will raise tens of millions in "soft money." The President is the one person in America who is able to advocate the best interests of the country as a whole. Why should we limit the speech only of those who seek to speak for the country as a whole?

Senator Bradley should leave the First Amendment alone. The First Amendment is correct. It stands in the way of preventing ill-advised efforts by the government to limit a candidate's right to speak. And if there cannot be limits on most of us, why should there be limits on any of us?

A second option is public financing which we now have with the presidential general elections. But such taxpayer-funded campaigns still leave Mr. Perot and the AFL-CIO and other committees free to spend millions creating an unlevel playing field. Also, public financing leaves the media with more horsepower than the candidates themselves have. And I cannot fathom how public financing would work in a primary situation. Would the government have funded everyone who showed up at the Republican debates this season? If so,

such funding would have produced countless more candidates. I am opposed to public financing. It is incestuous. It is an unnecessary use of taxpayers' money. It invites government regulations. It creates an unlevel playing field by favoring incumbents.

Finally, there are various proposals to require the media to give away TV time. (Such proposals would never work in a primary for the same reasons public financing could not work: How would you choose to whom to give it?) The lack of an opportunity for voters to consider the messages of candidates—especially insurgent candidates—is at the heart of the problem with our presidential process. But I am afraid these well-meaning proposals will drown in their own complexity and the law of unintended consequences will somehow rear its head again. Isn't the best solution for the media simply to cover the races and present the serious candidates on network news and in the newspapers more often on appropriate occasions, speaking for themselves?

Find the Good and Praise It

I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks that I came away from the campaign with a good feeling, not a bad feeling. My friend Alex Haley used to say, "Find the good and praise it," and I can easily do that about this process, even with its flaws. During the last year, I walked across New Hampshire, meeting several hundred people a day, spent 80 days in Iowa in maybe 200 meetings that ranged from 20 to 300 people, and had at least 50 meetings in Florida with the delegates to the Presidency III straw poll. During most of these meetings I was little known and unencumbered by the news media, so there was no disruption to the flow of the session.

I remember wishing time after time that anybody who had any sense of cynicism about our presidential selection process could be with me, like a fly on the wall, because they could not be cynical after hearing and seeing and feeling what I saw. The groups with whom I met always listened carefully. Most often, they wanted to talk about our jobs, our schools and our neighborhoods, and our families. In meeting after meeting, I came away certain that this is a nation hungry for a vision contest, not one willing to tolerate a trivial presidential election. I believe there is a great market in the American electorate for a full-fledged discussion about what kind of country we can have in the year 2000 and beyond.

As the song says, it is a long, long time from May 'til September when the presidential race really begins. One way to help fill this time usefully would be to review the way we pick Presidents and make certain that next time, in the new century, we have a process that attracts the largest number of good candidates, that gives them an opportunity to say and us to hear their messages, and gives as many of us as possible a chance to cast a meaningful vote.

One lesson I learned when I ran for President is that step one toward those objectives would be these four words: Off with the limits.