

YANKEE MAYORS,
DIAL-UP GOVERNORS,
AND AL GORE THE STRIP-MINER...

A WALTZ THROUGH TENNESSEE POLITICS

By Bill Kauffman

“**T**he mayor of Nashville being an Upstate New Yorker who went to Harvard—this would have been impossible to imagine 30 years ago,” says Nashville-based book publisher John S. Sanders. ■ Mayor Phil Bredesen is indeed a stark example of the transformation of Southern politics. A mix of Yorker and Yankee, founder of an HMO management firm, Mayor Bredesen affects no fake southern drawl: he offers coffee to you, not y’all. The language he speaks is that of the deal: he says things like, “We just put ourselves in play. People became aware that Nashville is willing to sit down and deal.”

Bredesen styles himself a “conservative Democrat.” M. Lee Smith, publisher of the inside-politics *Tennessee Journal*, reckons the second-term mayor a “business-oriented progressive. He loves the big deals: building the arena, getting the Oilers here.” Chores such as “getting Aunt Susie’s sidewalk fixed” are of less urgency. Despite its sequined image, Nashville is a city of trade and commerce, à la Atlanta and Charlotte. It is also capital of perhaps the most aggressively pro-business state in the union; so Phil Bredesen, melodious Upstate accent aside, seems a perfect fit.

The “carpetbagger” charge, with its echoes of Reconstruction, has lost its sting. “When I think of the political and

business and non-profit leaders, half of them are from California and New York, Michigan and Florida,” says Bredesen, who adds that “it’ll be a long time before a Tennessean is mayor of New York.”

Bud Adams, owner of the Tennessee Oilers (who came to town carrying the carpetbag to end all carpetbags), says, “Phil Bredesen is a smart man, a businessman. But I don’t think he’s seen too many football games, if you know what I mean.”

So what did you expect: Mayor Willie Nelson?

Nashville is not Hollywood. Country music people play little role in Tennessee politics: there are no bumptious Barbra Streisands on Music Row. Roy

Acuff did run for governor as a Republican in 1948, drawing record crowds, but most of his admirers came to hear the Smoky Mountain Boys play “Wabash Cannonball” rather than to listen to Roy read, verbatim, his ghosted speeches featuring such stumpers as “an ostrich who sticks his head in the sand and thinks he is hid can lose a lot of tail feathers!” Acuff pledged himself to the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, and the TVA. He asked listeners to “vote for the man with the fiddle,” but he lost by a two-to-one margin—which was pretty darn good for a Republican in 1948.

The only other Nashville celebrity to run for office was Tex Ritter, singer of “High Noon” and progenitor of the rubber-limbed actor John. The cerebral Ritter, certainly the only southern candidate ever to praise Eldridge Cleaver’s prose style during a campaign, ran as the moderate alternative to candy-heir William Brock in the 1970 Republican Senate primary. Like the little chocolate shells in Brock’s factories, Ritter got creamed.

Former governor Lamar Alexander (favorite singer: Eddy Arnold) guesses that as “country music goes on television, we’ll have more candidates for office.” He notes that what “helps Hollywood actors in politics is their training: they’re more appealing visually, they know how to move and talk and look at the camera. Most people in country music started out as songwriters.” Until the recent profu-

sion of male models in cowboy hats, Nashville's stars were both more literate and less photogenic than their Hollywood counterparts. Waylon Jennings may be smarter than Alec Baldwin and a boon party companion to boot, but he looks more like a candidate's reprobate brother than a candidate.

Mayor Bredezen (favorites: "cross-over music—Vince Gill, Garth Brooks") says that "for business CEOs who wanted to play on the national stage, [country music] was an embarrassment. People thought we all had guitars and bare feet: 'Hee Haw' was the vision. Of course it's a very sophisticated industry with very sophisticated executives. I've tried to bridge those gaps. We've asked country music people to be on boards and commissions."

My, how times do change. John Seigenthaler, the retired former editor of the *Tennessean*, remarks that years ago, "the idea that anybody in the music industry would be part of the Chamber of Commerce was so far-fetched it was laughable. Hank Williams would set himself on fire in some fleabag, drunk, or Webb Pierce would be arrested for trying to fight his way into some woman wrestler's dressing room."

Until the 1960s, road signs welcomed travelers to the "Three Great States of Tennessee." Topography and soil dictated politics: there was Andrew Johnson's mountainous east, a Republican redoubt; and the Democratic domains of the West, with its cotton lands and the fertile Central Basin, of which Nashville is the dimple.

The state remains tripartite, though mobility has had its usual homogenizing effect. Just as it is no longer unthinkable that a New Yorker can be mayor of Nashville, neither is a Republican statewide office-holder a freak. "When I was a young reporter, there was no Republican election outside a couple districts in East Tennessee," says John Seigen-

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A view from inside the Tennessee state capitol.

thaler. Yet today, the governor, Illinois-born Don Sundquist, is a Republican, as are Senators Fred Thompson and Bill Frist, both swept in on the 1994 GOP wave.

"I used to say that, all things being equal, the Democrats were going to win a statewide election. Now it's pretty close to a push," says M. Lee Smith, who ascribes the new parity to two changes. First, beginning in the 1960s, conservative West Tennessee Democrats abandoned the party of their ancestors, "largely as a reaction to the civil-rights movement." More recently, the prosperous suburbs of Nashville have become solidly—and generously—Republican. (In 1996, two of the five most lucrative GOP fund-raising zip codes in the nation were within Davidson County.)

Lamar Alexander, whom Smith describes as a "classic East Tennessee Republican," points out that Tennessee was "the [Southern] state where Ronald Reagan got his lowest percentage. The conservative movement that swept across the South with Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan had less of an effect here." The hoary Republicanism of East Tennessee is distinctly moderate; any rightward tug on the party has come from the Nashville suburbs or the erstwhile Democrats of the West.

Alexander emphasizes his state's typicality: "Tennessee's culture, mores, attitudes, are pretty much Middle America. The number-one *Billboard* artist isn't a rap musician, it isn't music out of Hollywood or New York, it's LeAnn Rimes out of Nashville. The most Bibles are sold out of here at a time of religious awakening. We're the prime spot for Japanese companies to come in America."

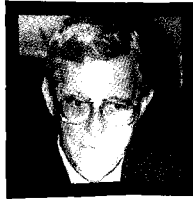
With three potential presidential candidates in 2000 (Alexander, Fred Thompson, and Al Gore), it also has become a prime spot for ambitious politicians. Bruce Dobie, editor of the weekly *Nashville Scene*, has a theory about that: "We're not Deep South; there are no elements of radicalism. As you move north into Tennessee or Kentucky, you find southern charm or grace, which embrace certain political skills—compromise, amiability. Move north into the Midwest and it's boring and charmless."

Tennessee touches more states (eight) than any other member of the Union; outsiders, whether Carolina lawyers or Japanese companies, have fared well here. Nashville has become "cosmopolitan," says Mayor Bredezen. As illustration, Lamar Alexander says, "You can buy country hams, but you can also get good sushi here."

Not all Tennesseans have bought into this vision of the abundant life. The Vanderbilt-centered authors of *I'll Take My Stand* asked in 1930, "How may the little agrarian community resist the Chamber of Commerce... which is always trying to import some foreign industry that cannot be assimilated into the life-pattern of the community?" In an age of Nissan and the Oilers, it is a question that is asked less and less.

The Jacksonian populist tradition in Tennessee is moribund, if not dead. The remaining populist Democrats "are all in their eighties and dying out," says Vanderbilt historian Paul K. Conkin. "They are as irrelevant as latter-day agrarians." And besides, says Bruce Dobie, when semi-populists achieve power they become "biz-pigs helping established big businesses."

This is not to say that modest beginnings do not carry political cachet. The state's two Republican presidential hopefuls, Lamar Alexander and Fred Thompson, emphasize their salt-of-the-earth upbringings, though not so baldly as did Andrew Johnson, who, fortified by brandy, slurred at his Vice-Presidential inauguration in March 1865, "I am going to tell the truth here today, and that is, I am a plebeian—and I thank God for it!"



**"The difference between us
and the federal government
is we're doing what we said
we would do.
The federal government
talks about it."**

—GOVERNOR DON SUNDQUIST

Vice President Albert Gore, Jr., raised in the Fairfax Hotel in Washington, D.C., can make no Johnsonian boast. "His familiarity with Tennessee is as slender as his southern accent," says John Sanders, although the younger Gore did spend four and a half years with *The Tennessean*. His big story, an investigation exposing the sale of zoning variances, had a "cleansing effect" on Nashville government, according to John Seigenthaler, who hired Gore.

The real Tennessean was the Vice President's father, Albert Gore, Sr. In political mythology, the senior Gore was the "dirt farmer's son" who "was one of the chief advocates of the little man against the big interests" until he was defeated for re-election in 1970 in a race-baiting campaign by William Brock. Gore Sr.'s descendants won't be doing any dirt farming, however, and that is largely thanks to his willingness, during his long House and Senate career, to carry water for the infamous Armand Hammer—Lenin's capitalist, the head of Occidental Petroleum, and a liar and briber of Stakhanovite proportions.

Senator Gore intervened on Hammer's behalf with President Kennedy, Soviet ministers, and cabinet members. He escorted Hammer to five presidential inaugurations before handing off the winner of the Lenin Order of Friendship Among the Peoples to son Albert for the 1981 inauguration of Reagan. Gore Sr.'s deeds did not go unrewarded: in 1950 the then-congressman was rewarded with a profitable partnership in a Hammer cattle-breeding business. (Gore's heavy labor for Hammer is detailed in Edward Jay Epstein's *Dossier*.)

After losing his Senate seat, Gore Sr. really hit the Hammer jackpot. He was named chairman of Island Creek Coal, the nation's third-largest coal producer, which Occidental Petroleum had acquired in 1968. The fighter for the little guy was making in excess of \$500,000 a year—somewhat out of the populist neighborhood.

And just what did Island Creek do? Strip-mine Kentucky, for one thing. John S. Sanders, scion of a family that owned two newspapers in Lexington, Kentucky, says, "Island Creek was a strip-mining

company. Even at that time strip-mining was deplored as an assault on the environment. Ex-Senator Gore apparently had no difficulties with that—nor has his son." (The Vice President and/or his ghostwriter was prudentially silent about strip-mining in his best-selling *Earth in the Balance*.)

As usual, the tabby cats of the elite press overlooked this story: the excavation was done by Bob Holladay of *The Williamson Leader*, a small weekly in Franklin, Tennessee. Island Creek was repeatedly cited for strip-mining violations during the years (1973-83) when the senior Gore was chairman. A spokeswoman for the Kentucky Division of Water Pollution called Island Creek a "major" polluter.

And so we are treated to the delicious irony that the family fortune of Washington's most prominent environmentalist was made by raping Kentucky and servicing Armand Hammer.

Gore Sr. also figures in the Vice President's strange boast that he and his wife served as models for the preppie Oliver Barrett IV and his plucky but doomed spouse in Erich Segal's *Love Story*. (It may be coincidence, but Barrett IV's mother is nicknamed "Topsy.") Novelist Segal gently corrected the Vice President's misconception, though the author did allow that Gore's relationship with his father inspired Oliver Barrett

IV's loathing of Oliver Barrett III. Young Oliver detests his father; he calls him "Old Stonyface," a loveless man who is "all form and no content."

Gore Jr.—Young Stonyface, we presume—"learned some lessons" from his dad's mistakes, says M. Lee Smith. "You can have a fairly liberal voting record, but you've got to keep yourself from getting separated from your constituents on the gut issues. Gore Jr. had a fairly liberal voting record but on the big issues he was careful not to get polarized. His dad was hurt by the race issue, by Vietnam, by school prayer. To Gore Sr.'s credit, he was probably more right than wrong [on race]."

Lamar Alexander, back for seconds after a failed 1996 presidential bid, currently works out of an office on Nashville's Music Row. Glen Campbell is next door, but the sartorial flavor of the neighborhood looks to be more Brooks Brothers than rhinestone cowboy. Morning copies of the *Wall Street Journal* rest in front of many of the bungalows stretching along this fabled boulevard.

Alexander is a seventh-generation Tennessean; he remarks that his ancestors "got here in the 1780s, before it was a state." He was an activist governor who sharply increased state spending on schools. This followed the tradition of Andrew Johnson, who as governor in 1854 successfully lobbied for the funding of public education through direct taxation.

At Vanderbilt, Alexander was a student of novelist Walter Sullivan, another native son. Sullivan was born in Nashville, educated at Vanderbilt, and has taught at the Commodore's university since 1949. Says Sullivan, a friend and admirer of Alexander, "I recall it was about time for Lamar to graduate and I said, 'Well, Lamar, what are you going to do now?' He said, 'I'm going to be governor of Tennessee.'"

Abraham Lincoln's law partner once said of him: "His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest." Is Alexander Lincoln-esque? He denies it: "I went to NYU for law school. Greenwich Village is not the place to go for a Tennessean who wants to be governor."

Alexander's fantastically profitable investments came under scrutiny in 1996. Strangely, conservatives made little of his vice chairmanship of Corporate Family Solutions, Inc., which he co-founded in 1987. The company operates 95 "child-development centers," providing daycare for the employees of such corporations as Boeing. I asked the governor about this:

TAE: Is the pervasiveness of dual-earner couples something that we should deplore?

ALEXANDER: It's better if a very young child has a parent at home. I even think it's better for the mother, as between the two parents, to be at home in the earliest months.

TAE: Months or years?

ALEXANDER: The earliest months make the greatest difference. But today, we have 75 percent of women who work away from home.

TAE: Yeah, but many of those are part-time. A woman who puts her five-month old in all-day daycare: this is negligent, isn't it?

ALEXANDER: No, it's not negligent, not unless you want to say that millions of women are negligent. Of all the options available in that real-life situation, work-site care is best because it helps a working parent remain as attached as possible to a child. It's the same kind of help that a babysitter at home would be: women working at home don't spend every single moment with their child. The workplace becomes a new American neighborhood, in a sense, where you provide the kind of support that neighbors have traditionally given in the care of children.

Alexander says he is "likely to run" in 2000.

The third potential Tennessean in the race, Senator Fred Thompson, might have been the first-ever presidential candidate to have uttered the f-word in a Hollywood motion picture. But after his fizzle at the Senate campaign-finance-scandal hearings he seems unlikely to run. A 55-year-old divorcé, Thompson is a fixture in the Nashville gossip pages, as he squires around women who are, well, not 55.

Country music vixen Lorrie Morgan, the Liz Taylor of Nashville (who is on her fourth husband and counting), writes of her former swain Senator Thompson in her new memoir (wittily titled *Forever Yours, Faithfully*): "Fred is an extremely generous man. He wined and dined me and bought me presents—furs, earrings, Chanel shoes with real high heels." But ultimately, "he could not accept me as I am."

While TAE was invading Tennessee, University of Tennessee quarterback Peyton Manning lost the Heisman Trophy to University of Michigan defensive back Charles Woodson. Volunteer fans, Governor Don Sundquist included, protested. Big deal: the most deserving candidate seldom wins the Heisman. But Manning is white and Woodson is black, and so it happened that the executive director of the Nashville NAACP denounced Sundquist for using a poisonously racist locution to describe Woodson. The governor's hate crime? He called Woodson "this guy from Michigan."

Sundquist was in high dudgeon when we chatted: "I'm sick and tired of everybody twisting every answer into a racist question."

If this was a vexing matter—and what politico wouldn't love the chance to defend the honor of his state's most popular athlete?—it was one of very few irritants in what has been a smooth first term. The governor has \$4.5 million to spend on a 1998 re-election bid and no Democratic foe in sight. (In 1994, Sundquist defeated Mayor Bredesen, who spent \$6 million of his own fortune in the governor's race.)

A former six-term congressman from West Tennessee, Sundquist declares, "the difference between us and the federal government is we're doing what we said we would do. The federal government talks about it." One thing he has done is hold the line on taxes. Tennessee remains one of seven states without an income tax, depending instead on a sales tax. Advocacy of a statewide income tax is akin to opining that Peyton Manning is an overrated quarterback who will flop in the pros.

Despite his midwestern roots, Sundquist speaks the language of the busi-

ness-oriented New South. In our interview, he points out that Tennessee is "first" or "best" in several categories: "highest percentage of people with some form of health-care insurance"; "first state to have the Internet in every public school and library"; "more foreign companies than any other state that's not on an ocean or a Great Lake." Summing it up, he says, "In Tennessee, *profit* is a good word."

There is a duality in Sundquist. His themes include both balanced-budget Republicanism and Gingrich-Kemp-style activism. His second-term agenda, as outlined in our interview, has a fairly radical tincture: he hopes to halve the number of state departments (currently 22) and make Tennessee the state with "the lowest taxes, fewest regulations, and least paperwork" in the country.

Yet he is also fluent in Gingrich-speak: he frequently calls for "offensive government" (as in "designed for attack," not "disagreeable to the senses") and is proud that state spending on K-12 education has risen by \$1 billion over the last six years.

Governor Sundquist attributes the state's congenial political climate to its casualness. Legislators serve part-time (sessions do not exceed 90 days) and are paid \$16,000 annually. Sundquist must be almost the only governor in the land whose home phone is listed in the book; he says he's not pestered by cranks.

For good or ill, cranks are in short supply in Tennessee politics. As one ex-Tennessean says of his state's practicality, "Tennessee's motto is 'Agriculture and Commerce.' How inspiring. Can you imagine Davy Crockett yelling, 'Agriculture and Commerce!' at the Alamo?"

Then again, after Crockett lost his bid to be re-elected to the House of Representatives, he told his Tennessee constituents, "You can go to Hell. I'm going to Texas." Most Tennesseans stayed put, and as stay-putters everywhere know, home—good old Rocky Top, Tennessee—is the best place to be.



THE LAND WHERE RELIGION IS HIP



The rock group Jars of Clay

By
Scott Walter

Unless you've driven down one of Nashville's seemingly endless streets of churches trying to find the one with the Christian ballet while your car radio is tuned to a Christian rock station, you just haven't had the Nashville religious experience. ■ Wherever one goes in the city, religious life is never far from the surface. Land at Nashville International Airport and discover that its facilities include a "meditation room," complete with couch, kneeler, and Bible. Visit the Ryman Auditorium, original home of the Grand Ole Opry, and you

quickly learn that the famous hall was originally built as the Union Gospel Tabernacle, a function that continued even as it gained fame for its non-Sabbath performances. Even today, the Ryman will feature a rockabilly concert on a Saturday night and also host 1,000 men for a 5:00 A.M. prayer meeting, as well as a concert of twelfth-century polyphony by St. Hildegard von Bingen.

Go to the new home of the Opry, and on the bulletin board backstage you'll find notices of church benefit concerts, as well as a handwritten note by a member of the Opry family who asks friends to pray for her son Jarrett, who's steam-

ing on the *U.S.S. George Washington* to the turbulent Gulf. Just read the other articles in this issue and you'll see that in Nashville, religion affects everything from restaurants to giant auto factories.

Even the free weekly *Nashville Scene* features classified ads not just for escort services but also, under "Musicians Wanted," for things like this: "Attention Serious Christian Musicians: Forming band w/tight grooves, even tighter harmonies. I need guys who can play/sing and most importantly love Jesus."

The extraordinary range of religious endeavor in the city quickly astonishes an observer from the relatively unchurched

Northeast. Nashville boasts Christian dancers, Christian clown troupes, Christian business circles, Christian rockers, Christian publishing companies, Christian museums. Many of the churches themselves sport everything from vast high-tech worship halls, to bookstores, to energetic counseling services, to Bible lost-and-found departments.

Nor is Nashville religion restricted to right-wing evangelical Protestantism. The Roman Catholic cathedral, near Vanderbilt, has standing-room-only crowds on Sunday, while in the Episcopal cathedral's parking lot one can see Toyotas with gay pride bumper stickers. Traveling west of downtown, one comes across a fresh yuppie townhouse development that looks across the highway to one of America's largest Hindu temples (the five priests there point with pride to one of the grandest idols of Sri Ganesha on the continent). The Mormons of Nashville are also trying to build a temple, though this does seem to be testing the limits of some citizens' ecumenism. And at a Reformed Jewish establishment known as "The Temple," Debbie Friedman can be heard performing "Jewish folk-rock."

Nashville's religious works range as much in size as flavor: a half-dozen friends in a living-room Bible study

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