

Lisa Schiffren

The Man From Tennessee

Lamar Alexander walked his way into the governor's mansion of his native state, and now he's running for president. We know that public life has paved his way to personal wealth—but what else has he done, and what, if anything, does he stand for?

When Lamar Alexander first ran for governor of Tennessee in 1974, his professional qualifications were typical of politically ambitious young men: law school, a clerkship with a famous judge, campaign work and a staff job for Senator Howard Baker, and a minor post in the Nixon White House. But whether it was post-Watergate repudiation of the GOP, or a more personal failure, Alexander, then 35, was trounced. His wife Honey told him, "The next time you run, you'd do better if you knew—and could tell voters—why you want to be governor."

Four years later, Alexander ran again, as men who feel destined to govern must do. This time he hired a slick, liberal Republican Washington consultant (Doug Bailey, now editor of the insider political newsletter *Hotline*). He dropped the traditional blue suit, adopted his trademark plaid shirt, and walked across Tennessee for six months—literally walked. Cynics saw the shirt and walk as a gimmick to fool conservative, rural Tennesseans. But along with the help of an obviously corrupt opponent, and the support of the state's business elite, the newly folksy Alexander carried the election.

"Still," he wrote in *Six Months Off*, one of his two memoirs, "there was one thing that eluded me. When my walk across Tennessee ended, I honestly still couldn't have expressed, just in so many words, why I wanted to be governor, or what I hoped to accomplish. I could feel that my moti-

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vation was more than just wanting to do my best at some challenging public service job. Something else in me must have known why I wanted to be governor—and the voters must have sensed it."

Now that Alexander is making a run for president, voters will have to sense why they should support yet another former governor of a small Southern state. The GOP convention is ten months away, and Alexander has yet to break 15 percent name recognition in the polls.

Despite his national obscurity, Alexander is usually ranked at the back of the first tier of GOP candidates, after Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole, the clear leader, and with Texas Sen. Phil Gramm and California Gov. Pete Wilson, all of whom hold powerful elective offices. While it's clear that he isn't a crank candidate, like former State Department appointee Alan Keyes or California Rep. Robert Dornan, it is puzzling that a former governor who served an undistinguished twenty months in the Bush cabinet is considered more credible than, say, Indiana Sen. Richard Lugar, a serious man with two decades on the national stage who is given zero chance of winning the nomination.

If charisma requires a commanding presence, Alexander lacks it. He is a fit, good-looking man, of medium build with regular features and a much-receded hairline. If you noticed him in an airport, you'd guess he was a doctor or some kind of executive.

But if he lacks personal magnetism, Alexander does have

another valuable asset—money. With the primaries scheduled so close together that an unexpectedly good showing in Iowa wouldn't leave much time to raise funds for New Hampshire, the conventional wisdom is that \$20 million, in hand by February 1996, is the price of admission for a serious bid. By early July, Alexander was halfway there.

And, in a party where everyone is more conservative than he once was, Alexander has had the good sense to reinvent himself politically. While his name used to evoke words such as "moderate" and "centrist," he is now pushing for a radical devolution of the federal government's tasks to the states. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of his current incarnation is his claim that he has always been a populist conservative.

"Lots of money and low name ID allow us to shape our message," says Mark Merritt, Alexander's director of communications, standing in his office at campaign headquarters in Nashville. "Our motto is 'Come on along,' which is an invitation to join us. Gramm is like a bulldozer, saying get on board or I'll run you over. That scares people. And Dole—Dole is not the future."

Hi-Tech Lamar

The future is a key concept for the Alexander campaign, which prides itself on being the first into cyberspace. Alexander uses a laptop himself, a rarity among politicians. His senior campaign staff has excellent conservative credentials, but lacks national campaign experience. Merritt previously ran Oliver North's Senate campaign. Mike Murphy, the Atwater-like senior consultant, worked for Dan Quayle. Daniel Casse, Alexander's brainy young policy director, served in the Bush White House and worked with William Kristol's Project for the Republican Future. Campaign manager Dan Pero came from Michigan Governor John Engler's staff. When a candidate chooses youth and energy over the establishment, it may be because he's forward-looking and willing to take risks.

Or perhaps the big boys were committed to more promising contenders. With the GOP capture of the House and Senate, being an outsider has lost much of its cachet. It's hard to campaign against government when your team is making a revolution inside the Beltway.

For all its careful crafting, Alexander's current platform is a standard mix of many of the policy goals and analytic bromides now circulating inside the GOP. His first aim as president, he says firmly, "is to help the United States recapture its confidence." "We are at a point in our history where we have more opportunity than ever before, and yet people have lost their belief that their children will have a better life than they've had."

What would he do about it? Alexander's management style is to choose two or three targets and go at them full bore. The three policy areas he'd concentrate on to restore confidence are: "fostering economic growth to provide a steady stream of new jobs"; "restoring to American families the freedom to plan their lives"; and returning to a culture of personal responsibility by "rebuilding families, neighborhoods, schools and churches." Tax cuts and a balanced budget—which, Alexander emphasizes, he achieved for all eight years of his governorship—are

the key to his vision. A flat tax and capital gains cuts will create new jobs. Freedom and personal responsibility will be restored by devolving all federal functions to the lowest possible level, making Congress increasingly irrelevant. Wherever possible he's for letting corporate America take over from government.

It takes much prodding to get Alexander to go beyond process and reveal what he really thinks. Devolution is fashionable, but is it sufficient policy? Saying "you choose" is a candidate's way of skirting decisions that define the job of governing. Nor is devolution true libertarianism, in which the state really gets out of the business of education or welfare.

This reasoning was the basis of Alexander's response to Bob Dole's recent attack on Hollywood. In a June 16 op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal*, Alexander argued that the "morally empty values promoted by . . . Hollywood" are only half the problem. "From Washington, we get a federal government determined to usurp and undermine the authority and responsibility of families, along with policies that imply that individuals should not be held accountable for their actions."

Well, yes, but will "getting out of the way" right the culture? The position may be more a reflection of the candidate's personality than a political call. In general, Alexander displays a classic WASP reticence to delve into anything especially emotional, spiritual, or psychological.

The passionate surely won't be satisfied with Alexander's new position on abortion, for instance, which is that he would neither fund nor encourage its use, yet not challenge the status quo.

But maybe he's playing to a different audience. Diane Ravitch, the leading educational theorist whom Alexander brought to the Department of Education, describes him as "a small government conservative, a libertarian," as she is. Ravitch is pleased that he never resorts to stirring up passions which, she says, cost the GOP so much at Houston in 1992.

Alexander always speaks in firm, well-formulated sentences. At times he squints or stares at the wall as he appears to think through an answer. A recent interview in Nashville confirmed Ravitch's claim that he listens closely and responds thoughtfully.

But then I reread the candidate's stump speech, which contained, verbatim, the majority of his answers to my questions. The stump speech is itself a truncated version of a chapter Alexander authored, with the help of a ghostwriter, for a Hudson Institute book called *The New Promise of American Life*. Indeed, his *Wall Street Journal* op-ed contained many of the same anecdotes and examples used in the book chapter. Such a tightly controlled script raises the specter of an "empty suit," as well as doubts about intellectual flexibility and comfort with the ideas he is promulgating.

It also leads to the questions about political conviction that have dogged his campaign in this most ideological of years. "The question is," says one prominent activist, "is he a smart guy who can tell which way the wind is blowing? Or did he become a true believer?"

Alexander bristles at such talk, preferring to blame the

perception that he is other than a hard-line conservative on his demeanor. "I have a moderate personality," he said. "I've joked with Bill Bennett that he could advocate pure liberalism and conservatives would cheer, and I could say, 'Off with their heads,' and they'd say I was a liberal.

"I'm not angry," he continued. His record, he insisted, proves the authenticity of his conservatism.

In fact, the evidence is ambiguous.

The Growing Years

Alexander grew up in Maryville, Tennessee, where his mother ran a nursery school and his father was a school principal. It is a small mountain town, in a region that remained in the Union when the rest of the state seceded. That history still shapes the area's political identity today. The region is solidly Republican, in what one Nashville lawyer describes as a "purely cultural" way. "Those people are Republican the way they're Baptists—'cause their daddies and their granddaddies were Republicans. It has nothing to do with ideas, or because they're for Newt."

Alexander attended Vanderbilt University, where he was editor of the school paper and a great crusader for integration, and graduated in 1962. He went on to law school at New York University, and then served a clerkship in New Orleans with Judge John Minor Wisdom, who had a national reputation for progressive views on civil rights issues.

In 1967, Alexander joined the campaign of Howard Baker, who became the first Tennessee Republican elected to the Senate in four decades. Alexander accompanied him to Washington as a legislative assistant. Baker subsequently got him a job in the Nixon White House, where he was executive assistant to the legendary Washington insider Bryce Harlow, who ran Nixon's congressional liaison operation.

It was at a Hill staff softball game that he met his wife to be, Leslee "Honey" Buhler, a Smith graduate from Texas then working for Sen. John Tower. As he later wrote, he was bowled over by how cute she looked as she slid into a base in her red shorts. In the early years, she raised their four children while doing volunteer work, specifically for Planned Parenthood. Later she headed the Task Force on Healthy Children, and, in addition to dabbling in their investments (see "Cashing In" below), she has been a member of the board of the Corporation of Public Broadcasting.

Colleagues from Alexander's early years seem to remember him universally as an affable, bright guy. But they don't recall a thing about his political views. "My recollection is that Lamar was highly regarded," says Martin Anderson, a conservative economist who worked with Alexander in the highly politicized Nixon White House. "But I never had a policy discussion with him."

Indeed, nowhere in his memoirs does Alexander describe

a policy issue or political fight that interested him beyond general economic development. The portrait that emerges of this early Lamar looks an awful lot like that of his mentor Howard Baker—centrist, non-ideological, and, as one Washington insider put it, "quintessentially establishment."

When Alexander became Tennessee's governor in 1978, in the midst of Jimmy Carter's presidency, conservatives were just crystallizing their revolutionary ideas on taxes and regulation. But there is little to suggest Alexander was much interested in those ideas. He ran a "good government" administration, according to GOP national committeewoman Alice Algood. "But there was nothing conservative about it," she says, "if you mean making government smaller."

"He never did anything to encourage the growth of a responsible conservative voice in state government," adds a Tennessee GOP activist. "He promoted a lot of nice looking people with no principles."

Like so much of the South, Tennessee became a hotbed of entrepreneurship in the late 1970s and '80s, and Alexander

deserves some credit for this. He recruited both a Nissan and a General Motors/Saturn plant to the state, and made doing business in Tennessee more attractive by building highways and improving the school system. During his tenure the state's per capita income shot up from 47th to 36th in the nation. "Under

Governor Bill Clinton," Alexander likes to say, "Arkansas' per capita income went from 49th to 49th."

If it's true that a successful politician is measured by the enemies he makes, it's revealing that in Tennessee it is just about impossible to find anyone who'll say he hates Alexander, or even strongly dislikes him. "Disappointed" is the word most often used. State Senator Jim Holcomb speaks with much personal respect for Alexander, but is backing Phil Gramm, who has won more straw polls than Alexander at county GOP gatherings. "[Gramm is] just more conservative on a bunch of issues," says Holcomb, "including social issues Lamar wouldn't talk about."

Holcomb, a former social worker, considers himself part of the more populist generation of lawmakers who have been elected to the Tennessee legislature in the decade since Alexander left office. And he remembers one especially telling anecdote about the former governor.

"He offered to come to my campaign kickoff," Holcomb remembers. "When I told him it was going to be in a K-Mart parking lot, he was horrified. He suggested I have it at the local country club. He was offering his best strategic advice."

Cashing In

The state of Tennessee got rich in the 1980s, and so did Lamar Alexander. He left the governorship in 1986, and since then his income has averaged around half a million dollars a year, less than one-third of that in salary. For each

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of the last three years his income has topped \$1 million, though he's essentially been running for president since the end of the Bush administration.

More than most Tennesseans, he benefited from the risks taken by a handful of entrepreneurs, who, in time-honored fashion, "took care" of him. His fortune is founded on sweetheart deals not available to the general public, and a series of cozy sinecures provided by local businessmen. Such deals are not illegal, and it will be up to voters to judge whether they are proper and what they say about a man who has spent his career in public office.

When his term expired in January 1987, the entire Alexander family headed for Australia for "Six Months Off," the title of the book he wrote about the family vacation. It is hard to imagine that his \$45,000 advance covered the cost of the trip, which must have exceeded \$128,308—the amount he deducted in expenses related to the book. The IRS does not allow cost of living deductions for travel books, though many authors get away with it.

Jack Massey, a founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken and, in the 1980s, the massively profitable Hospital Corporation of America, is one of the rich men who has taken good care of Alexander. While in Australia, Alexander received consulting fees from Tennessee's Belmont College to create a "leadership institute" at Belmont's Massey Business School. Alexander declines to say what those fees were in 1987, but they were \$100,000 in 1988. Lamar and Honey were also paid \$44,000 in consulting fees in 1988 by Jack Massey's venture capital firm, Massey Birch.

In 1987, Massey bankrolled a start-up company called Corporate Child Care Inc., to the tune of \$2 million. All told, the Alexanders invested \$5,000 in the stock. This is the basis of Alexander's proud claim that he co-founded a business that now employs 1,200 people. Marguerite Sallee, who had served as staff director on Honey's Task Force on Healthy Children, and was then appointed state commissioner of human services by Alexander, left her job to head the start-up, of which she became CEO.

Starting a company is hard work, which Lamar missed by being in Australia, though Sallee loyally told reporters for the *Nashville Tennessean* that he did "hands on" work in 1987. CCCI, which identified a real market need for corporate child care, boomed. In 1991, Alexander estimated the value of the stock at \$800,000, a 15,900 percent return on an investment held for four years.

Also in 1987, Christopher Whittle, the Tennessee millionaire who was part owner of *Esquire*, let Alexander purchase shares in closely-held Whittle Communications. Alexander wrote a check for \$10,000 that

was never cashed. After Whittle sold part of his company, Alexander received \$330,000 for his shares, a profit of \$320,000.

Actually, he didn't even put up the \$10,000 for the stock, since the amount was drawn against the \$125,000 in "consulting fees" Whittle paid Lamar during 1987 for help with a magazine that ultimately failed. When he became president of the University of Tennessee in 1988, Alexander shifted his Whittle stock to Honey to avoid conflict-of-interest rules.

In 1977 Alexander purchased a one-third interest in a luxury Tennessee corporate retreat called Blackberry Farm for \$10,000. He sold it back to the owner when he became governor in 1979, then repurchased it for the same \$10,000 in 1987. The controlling owner of the retreat is Sandy Beall, the millionaire founder of the Ruby Tuesday's restaurant chain and a long-time financial backer of Alexander's. Again, when he became president of U.T., Alexander put ownership in Honey's name to avoid conflict-of-interest rules. The University was embarrassed when it became known that the school had spent

\$64,626 for business retreats at Blackberry Farm during Lamar's tenure, because Honey's ownership violated university nepotism rules.

Alexander's pattern of shifting assets to Honey suggests, among other things, a very secure marriage; it's hard to imagine Hillary Clinton shifting her assets to Bill. Such transfers are not legal under federal ethics or securi-

ties laws, which illustrates yet again that the ethics rules of small Southern states are not a useful measure of integrity.

In 1991, on his way to Washington, Alexander sold his Nashville home, purchased one year earlier for \$570,000, to a Whittle executive for \$977,500. It's not clear whether he bought below market or sold high. But unless the price of real estate doubled in a year—a year the rest of the country saw the real estate market slump—at least one side of the deal was artificially sweetened.

Other deals offered the Alexanders but not private citizens include Honey's purchase in 1984 of Corrections Corporation of America stock for \$8,900. The company, founded by Tennesseans, was formed to privatize prisons. When CCA proposed privatizing Tennessee's prisons in 1985, First Lady Honey swapped the stock with Jack Massey's venture capital firm for shares in a life insurance company. She later sold those shares for \$142,000, a profit of about \$133,000.

One particularly interesting deal occurred in 1981, when then-Governor Alexander, Sen. Howard Baker, and others purchased an option to buy the failing *Knoxville Journal*. Alexander, who put up \$1, later swapped it for Gannett Co. stock that he subsequently sold for \$620,000.

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tration Alexander has been "of counsel" to Baker's law firm, Baker, Donelson, Caldwell and Bearman. His most recent tax returns show income of nearly \$400,000 from the firm for 1994, a year he spent campaigning full-time. Paying such a large stipend to a no-show is rare, so it wasn't surprising when the *Wall Street Journal* recently reported that the firm had broken up over the matter of Alexander's compensation.

Baker's law firm provided Alexander with other financial opportunities. He serves on several boards, including Lockheed Martin (formerly Martin Marietta), a Baker client, which paid him \$93,000 in 1994.

These highlights largely explain how Alexander entered public office in 1979 with a stated net worth of approximately \$151,000, and now claims assets of between \$3 and \$6 million. In that time he has spent a total of four years in the private sector.

Asked to explain his financial success, Alexander said firmly, "During my career I've spent half my time in the private sector trying to make money. I think the American people would rather have a president who made more good investments than bad. I believe in capitalism and this is how every job in America is created. I think it's a strength."

The Education Years

Alexander's actual political work in the 1990s amounts to twenty months as secretary of education in the Bush administration. Despite his claim that he suggested to Ronald Reagan that the department be abolished, he accepted the job after angling for an administration post at least since the 1988 Republican convention in New Orleans, where, amidst convention hall booths selling the usual bumper stickers and paraphernalia about abortion, guns, and homeschooling, there was a special kiosk selling Lamar—his buttons, his pictures, his books.

The portrait that emerges from his tenure at the Education Department is of a man both politically dexterous and ideologically ambiguous. Three key decisions illustrate his approach to the issues of the day. His first decision as secretary involved the Middle States College Accreditation board, which had threatened to strip accreditation from Bernard Baruch College in New York, because it didn't meet a diversity quota, and Westminster College, which, because it was a religious school whose board was comprised of ordained ministers, in a faith that did not ordain women, failed to pass the gender quota. Among other things, accreditation determines whether a school can receive federal scholarships.

Alexander announced that academic standards and not "diversity" were the criteria for accreditation, and he reconfigured the system to give permanent competition to the politically correct accreditors. This was his only unambiguously principled decision.

Alexander's second major decision was more complicated. In December 1990, Michael Williams, then-assistant secretary of education for civil rights, called a press conference to announce a curtailment of race-based scholarships, based on a case involving black-only scholarships at the

University of Arizona. Williams cited Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which specifically forbids racial discrimination in higher education, as grounds for disallowing such scholarships, which had become common practice as a minority recruiting device.

Once the issue hit the papers Williams, who is black, found himself facing not only the black lobby, but universities that dole out race-specific scholarships, and even President Bush. As Williams recalled in a recent interview, Bush responded by immediately releasing a statement affirming his support for the United Negro College Fund.

"As a question of law, it was clear. As a question of politics, I guess not," Williams concedes.

So even before he was confirmed, Alexander was asked to defuse the situation. This he did over the next year, with a policy that Williams and other Bush administration proponents of non-discrimination describe diplomatically as "extraordinary finesse" and, more bluntly, "caving." A former Department of Justice official who advised Alexander on the policy characterized his approach as: "There must be a way to paper this over that's lawful, that also shuts people up."

The case is long and nuanced, but these points are relevant: Alexander's policy essentially told schools that they could continue to give the same scholarships to the same students; they simply had to broaden the language of the scholarship criteria by adding other qualifications—relevant or not—so that race did not appear to be the sole criterion.

At the same time, the secretary argued, because the Arizona case involved privately financed scholarships, it should not be covered by Title VI regulations; though the institution was public, the money was private.

Williams noted the great irony of this view, given that Ted Kennedy had a few years earlier forced passage of the Civil Rights Restoration Act, which required any institution that received a dime of public money to comply with all civil rights regulations. Williams had gleefully anticipated using Kennedy's bill to foil politically correct racial discrimination.

Whether Alexander split the difference because he preferred to, or because he was under orders from the White House, is unclear, but he adamantly defends his decision today. "Our policy was a principled one," he says. "If conservatives don't understand that, I assure you that university officials, civil rights leaders, and the Clinton administration did."

Indeed, the Clinton administration immediately reversed Alexander's policy on taking office. But a June Supreme Court decision unambiguously confirmed the Williams interpretation.

Though Alexander's actions on the issue undermine his campaign claim to be strenuously opposed to affirmative action, Michael Williams believes he understands the reason for Alexander's waffling. "A lot of Republican men of his generation and older suffer from what I call 'White Men's Disease,'" Williams says. They have "such profound fear of being called a racist that they will sacrifice anything, especially principle, to avoid it."

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Hugh Embarrassment

by Mark Steyn

Hugh Grant's sin was a simple one: he acted "out of character." Or as David Letterman put it: "If Tom Arnold and Hugh Grant were making a movie and afterwards one of them was arrested with a hooker, I think we'd all assume it was my first guest . . . Tom Arnold!" Arnold could get away with patronizing hookers, just as his ex-wife Roseanne got away with *being* a hooker, recycling her prostitution experiences through a bestselling memoir and a zillion talk-show confessionals. But Hugh Grant? He was supposed to be as wholesome as Doris Day, and Doris doesn't go cruising for midnight cowboys.

Every star persona is a concoction, but Grant's, uniquely, was invented by his American public, and imposed on him from seven thousand miles away. Just a year or so ago he had a minor part in a BBC radio serial, earning little more per episode than the 60 bucks he allegedly paid Miss Devine Brown for their brief encounter on Sunset Boulevard. "My life was so much better before all this. Nobody knew or cared about me," he moaned to a British friend after his arrest. "None of it is worth it."

He soon wised up, of course. But after the spin-doctors have completed their exhaustive campaign of image retrieval, I'll bet his sense of self-loathing is even greater: "Hughie Goes To Hollywood" provides an instructive lesson both in American attitudes to British sex and British attitudes to American celebrity. In an age when most leading men are muscle-bound bozos with the sexual charisma of Timothy McVeigh, Grant was sweet,

self-deprecating, droll, sensitive. The screenwriter of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, the film that brought the floppy-fringed English charmer to stateside stardom, says that of all the rules for making a successful British movie, the only one that counts is to put Hugh Grant in it, because every moviegoing female in America wants to sleep with him.

Now his female admirers have discovered that, when it comes to sexual relations with women, the endearing Brit prefers the same detached, unfelt, transitory exchanges as Rob Lowe, Charlie Sheen, Chuck Robb, President Clinton, and all the other celebrity clods with four-alarm fires in their trousers. Not surprisingly, America's womanhood is feeling suckered. But the British could have warned them beforehand. Indeed, the Anglo-American cultural relationship as a whole could be put this way: you send us

your celebrities and we treat them as jokes; we send you our jokes and you treat them as celebrities. It was the London tabloids that transformed Michael Jackson into Wacko Jacko and blew open the child abuse allegations, tracking down any embittered 12-year old with a story to sell. On the other hand, the British were amazed when the Americans gave an Oscar to Emma Thompson, an object of routine derision in her native land.

So it was with Grant: at American dinner parties, women cooed, "Isn't Hugh Grant *so* sexy?" In Britain, they scoffed, "God, can you believe Hugh Grant's a star in America? I knew him at Oxford and he was such a prat." Like most public schoolboys who drift into acting, Grant's socially homosexual. I don't mean that he has penetrative sex with other men; but that off-screen he pouts and flounces and queens and camps and minces and limp-wrists his way around the room calling himself "Hughie-poops" and everybody else "sweetie." He was a member of the Piers Gaveston Society, named after King Edward II's sodomite boyfriend; there are pictures of him in lip gloss and fishnet stockings, and some rather more active snaps rumored to be in the safekeeping of Lord Moyné's son. In England, where every man is gay or feels obliged to pretend to be, this is all perfectly normal. But it is not the stuff of Hollywood stardom. Bruce Willis doesn't do fishnets.

This side of Grant isn't "out of character"; it's entirely consistent with the role Grant played in *Four Weddings*. Look at his previous films, the Australian *Sirens* and Roman Polanski's *Bitter Moon*. In both of them, Grant gives exactly the same performance as in *Four Weddings*, but with one difference: he's the designated dork, just another



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