

THE SICKENING DECAY OF LAMAR ALEXANDER

Lamar Alexander is a small-town boy from Maryville, TN, near Knoxville*, the son of a preschool teacher and a high school principle. He was a fine pianist, and athlete, and high school class president. He went to Vanderbilt, where he compiled a great record, went to law school, and clerked for Judge Minor Wisdom at the Fifth Circuit. He became involved in national politics, serving under Bryce Harlow in the Nixon White House, and as a staffer for Senator Howard Baker. He was also active in Tennessee politics, where he was campaign manager for the first Republican governor in 50 years. Alexander was elected governor in 1978, succeeding Ray Blanton. Blanton didn't run, probably because he was suspected of issuing pardons for bribes and of selling state liquor licenses, both of which turned out to be true. At that time, I was working in the Tennessee Attorney General's office, and I vividly remember discussions about an early swearing-in to prevent Blanton from further crimes, as well as some arguably funny stories about the sale of liquor licenses.

His Commissioner of Commerce and Insurance was John Neff, a decent and highly competent man as were all of Alexander's appointees. In mid-1980 Neff hired me to be his Assistant Commissioner for Securities, a post I held for three and a half years. That gave me the opportunity to see up close that Alexander was a decent governor. He never once interfered in any of the decisions I made as Commissioner, either in prosecuting or in rule-making. He never interfered with my hiring decisions, though he presumably knew directly or indirectly that I was a Democrat. Among positive things, he was an education reformer. I didn't agree with all his ideas, but there was no doubt of his personal dedication to improving the education system in Tennessee, and his willingness to spend political capital and

work with Democrats to achieve his goals.

After two terms as governor, Alexander was appointed President of the University of Tennessee, where he did a decent if vanilla job. He left that position to become Secretary of Education under the first Bush. There was a hint of weirdness: Alexander overruled an advisory committee and approved the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools as an accrediting organization. The group had been denied that status under Reagan, probably because it was formed to accredit colleges that taught creation science. The group is still accredited, having been reapproved in 2013**.

Alexander's career was buoyed up by a number of Tennessee businessmen and friends, including Jack Massey (KFC), Ted Welch (real estate), Tom Beasley (Corrections Corporation of America), and Chris Whittle. Welch was a major Republican fundraiser. These connections nourished Alexander's political career, and while in the private sector, he became fairly wealthy. Envious people might raise questions about the arrangements that led to his wealth, but this was and is common, and more or less acceptable for politicians not named Clinton. He was an unsuccessful candidate for president in 1996 and 2000, and was elected to the Senate in 2002, both times running as a moderate Republican.

Alexander was a member of Westminster Presbyterian Church, a PCUSA church in Nashville, where I was a member of the choir for over 20 years. The choir processed in and out on Sunday morning, and I saw him often with his wife, Honey. The preacher was K. C. Ptomey, a brilliant man and a wonderful preacher. His command of Presbyterian and Christian history and dogma was amazing, and I learned a great deal from listening to him Sunday after Sunday, and at least one Sunday School class he led that didn't conflict with choir practice. As a young man in the early 60s, K.C. was involved in efforts to open the Presbyterian Church to African-Americans. You could not hear a sermon

without realizing that K.C. was a good person.

Massey, Welch and Ptomey are dead now. Alexander is wealthy and probably won't run again, given his age and the rise of Trumpism in Tennessee. He isn't beholden to anyone, and is free to follow his conscience. He certainly knows that Trump is ignorant and a bully, and he's smart enough to suspect that Trump is mentally unstable. He certainly knows about the White Nationalist Steve Bannon and the rest of the Dr. Strangelove characters and witless nepotists in the White House. He doesn't have to kiss Trump's ring, but he does: he's carrying the nomination of Betsy DeVos forward, and promises to "repair" (the Frank Luntz rebrand word) Obamacare.

To me Alexander represented the classic Republican realist/moderate, and I assume that was the kind of man his mentors and wealthy donors supported. I have no idea what they would think of Trump or of the man Alexander has become. I imagine his parents would be appalled by his support of Betsy DeVos.

But I feel certain that K.C. would be ashamed of Lamar Alexander, and deeply depressed that he puts party over country, rejecting the principles, the ethics and the ideals K.C. lived and taught. It makes me sad too.

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* Some of this history is based on personal knowledge, and some is from this Wikipedia entry.

** Full disclosure: when I was with the State AG, I handled two cases for the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, which was in charge of policing colleges, both involving religious schools. I was successful in the case that went to trial, and the other school made arrangements to be accredited by an agency acceptable to THEC.