

Former Tennessee senator shares lessons from decades in public service

Lamar Alexander discusses recently-published memoir during McCain Institute's Authors & Insights virtual series

By Katelyn Reinhart, ASU News
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Through his decades of public service, one might expect former U.S. Senator of Tennessee Lamar Alexander to offer complicated guidance on what makes a successful and long-lived career.

But his insights are surprisingly simple: “Lose your sense of purpose, and there's really not much reason to be in public life.”

At a virtual event held by the McCain Institute on July 23, Alexander discussed his latest book, “The Education of a Senator: From JFK to Trump.” The memoir was published in May of this year.

Talking with McCain Institute Executive Director Evelyn Farkas, Alexander said being purposeful was his north star throughout his career.

“Having a clear sense of purpose is the way you make your way through this digital democracy and all of the indignities that come along with public life,” Alexander said. “If you know that you're there for a purpose — whether it's to help Ukraine, fight cancer, do something about HIV/AIDS, fix immigration — if you know you're doing that, the indignities kind of fade away.”

Alexander's book covers the last 60 years of American politics with behind-the-scenes insights from his career, including collaborating with politicians across the political spectrum.

Consistent with the values of the McCain Institute and the late Sen. John McCain's leadership, Alexander emphasized the importance of character-driven leadership at the event.

“I've had a chance to work with 10 presidents over the last nearly six decades, and know a couple of others,” he said. “And my conclusion is that ... the most important characteristics for a president or anyone in public life, to me, are character and temperament. And after that, they can lean left or

lean right.”

Perhaps best known for his work in education, health care and national parks legislation, Alexander was known to be a fervent collaborator and effective legislator. Among other stories from his career, “The Education of a Senator: From JFK to Trump” also shares a story about McCain.

“He talked about the time in 1970 when he’d been in solitary confinement for two years,” said Alexander at the event, “and the guards took him out to exercise. One of them drew a cross in the dirt, and I remember John saying, ‘Aren’t we, aren’t we lucky to live in this country as we do?’”

Alexander’s book was also written with a unique audience in mind: those considering a career in public service.

“I wrote my book to persuade them to do that and hopefully to inspire them to do it and to let them know that ... figuring out how to be elected or to go to work for somebody else who has is the surest way to help the most people and to be a part of keeping our republic from falling apart. You can do a lot of good things in private life, but there are some things that just have to be done in public life.”

The event with Alexander was an installment of the McCain Institute’s Authors & Insights series, a virtual series that features interviews with some of the most influential changemakers and authors of our time.

Learn more about the McCain Institute, and its upcoming events, at www.mccaininstitute.org/.

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Main image



The U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University

Text image(s)



McCain Institute Executive Director Evelyn Farkas (left) interviews former Sen. Lamar Alexander for the McCain Institute's Authors & Insights virtual series on July 23. Courtesy image