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In praise of Lamar Alexander

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Mark Russell, the great political comedian, used to say: "We Washingtonians are just like other Americans. Doesn't everyone curl up at night with the Congressional Record?"

I'm a long-time Washingtonian, and therefore I am just like other Americans. I'm sure that everyone wakes up thinking about Lamar Alexander, the Tennessee Republican seeking a third term in the Senate.

I am conflicted about Alexander's bid for re-election. As a Democrat, I fervently believe in the importance of keeping a Democratic majority in the Senate. But as a student of the Senate, I strongly believe that Alexander plays an important role, and is needed there for not just the next 16 months, but for the six years that follow.

Men and women reach the Senate via many paths. Carl Levin vaulted to the Senate from the Detroit City Council; Bill Bradley was a famous basketball player; Maria Cantwell, a high-tech entrepreneur. Elizabeth Warren seized the public consciousness by battling the big banks. There are always many members of the Senate who successfully climbed the political ladder, reaching the Senate after serving in the House of Representatives, or as the attorney general of their states.

But Lamar Alexander is a recognizable Senate type — a person who comes to the Senate having already established a record of great accomplishment in public life. Most of these senators were governors of their states, such as Abraham Ribicoff, Gaylord Nelson, Ed Muskie, Fritz Hollings, Mark Hatfield, David Boren, and, most recently, Tim Kaine. Alexander had one of the most distinguished backgrounds, coming to the Senate at the age of 62, after having been Tennessee's governor and a cabinet officer — Secretary of Education in the administration of George H.W. Bush.

Lamar Alexander was an exceptional governor. In the early 1980's, America was struggling to recover from what was then the deepest recession since Great Depression. Many Americans harbored doubts about our ability to compete with Japan, and trade tensions with Japan were rising. Alexander was one of the first public officials to work intensively on attracting Japanese investment to his state. He understood, before others did, that Japanese investment in the United States could help spark a U.S. economic comeback, and benefit his own state. The Nissan plant in Smyrna, Tennessee, was the crown jewel of his efforts.

Alexander was also one of a handful of governors in the first generation of education reformers after the Reagan administration's landmark report on "The Nation at Risk," a group that prominently included Bill Clinton. Alexander pursued creative education reforms so intensely that President Bush picked him to be Education Secretary.

As a Democrat, I often disagree with Alexander's positions. And his achievements in the Senate do not compare to the achievements of Ribicoff, Nelson, and Muskie because he has served in a Senate that is a bad joke compared to their Senate. But Alexander exemplifies the qualities that a senator should have: wisdom that comes from experience, independence, a commitment to bipartisanship, and a willingness to seek common ground and reach principled compromise.

In 2010, the START nuclear arms control treaty faced a steep upward battle for ratification in the Senate. The Republican leaders were fiercely opposed to the treaty negotiated by the Obama administration. At a key juncture, Senator Alexander, who was thought to be opposed to the treaty, attended a briefing by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He came out, announced that he was convinced of the treaty's merits, and endorsed it. He listened to the arguments, weighed the merits of the case, and exercised independent judgment. It was the way the great Senate used to work, but it happens all too rarely now.

Alexander earned my lasting admiration in September 2011 when he chose to resign his position in the Senate Republican leadership. He made his move without great fanfare, but it was quite clear that he could not abide the harsh partisanship and the strategy of obstruction being pursued by Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell. Having begun his career on the staff of Howard Baker, one of the greatest senators and Senate leaders who ever served, Alexander knew, to his core, that the Senate was not functioning the way it should, and he was determined to pursue bipartisan legislative solutions to the nation's problems.

In my view, America continues to need a Democratic Senate for many reasons, but most particularly because of the extremism of the Republican House. But the Senate is the place in our system where Democrats and Republicans have to come together to make legislative accomplishments possible. After a long downward spiral, the Senate this year has begun to come back. When a group of senators manage to forge some important compromise, such as the recent student loan legislation, Alexander is among the "usual suspects." His experience, independence and judgment make him particularly valuable in helping the Senate return to respectability. He will be even more essential after the next election as many of the most experienced senators with notable accomplishments are retiring.

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