

Address Before a Joint Session of the Tennessee State Legislature in Nashville

March 15, 1982

Governor Alexander, [Lieutenant] Governor Wilder, Speaker McWherter, honorable members of the Court, distinguished members of the General Assembly, and honored guests:

I'm delighted to be here in Tennessee. Your motto is, "America At Its Best," which is why all Americans will be proud when Tennessee plays host to the world this summer at the Knoxville World's Fair. I have my button already.

And I am particularly glad to be here in Nashville, the world's center for bluegrass and country music, where Minnie Pearl and Roy Acuff live and where the Oak Ridge Boys have made their fortune. You know, if the Oak Ridge Boys win any more gold, they'll have more in their records than we have in Fort Knox. [Laughter]

The only thing unsettling about being here is that every time I hear someone talk about fiddling, I think another congressional committee is tampering with the budget. [Laughter]

It's an honor to come to the home State of my good friend Howard Baker, who has led the U.S. Senate so ably and whose leadership is key to the bipartisan solution or coalition that we must have to bring progress to our nation. Together with the rest of your fine congressional delegation and your innovative State leadership, we have the chance to make government work again, to finally get it off our backs and out of our pockets. And let me add a special "thank you" to Representative John Bragg for his help in working on our Federal initiative.

You know, flying in here this afternoon, looking out over your beautiful countryside bordered by the blue Smokies on one side and Old Man River on the other, I was reminded of how many great leaders this State has shaped and how much our country has relied on them. Some of our nation's greatest heroes -- Davy Crockett, John Sevier, Sam Houston, Andrew Jackson -- all were Tennessee volunteers. It's a history to be proud of.

All were known for their bravery and resourcefulness, but chief among them was the man whose birthday we celebrate today. The first United States President to be born in a log cabin, Jackson spoke for the average citizen and fought the vested interests. And just a short time ago, before coming here, I was proud to lay a wreath on his grave.

It was Jackson who reminded us that "One man with courage makes a majority." Throughout his stormy life he lived by that motto, defending his honor, our Union, and the inalienable rights of every American citizen, regardless of station.

"The eyes of all nations are fixed on our Republic. . . . Great is the stake placed in our hands; great is the responsibility which must rest upon the people of the United States." Those are Andrew Jackson's words, but they still ring true. You and I have come to office in a time of crisis

for our country, but we're working our way out of an inherited economic mess that is the worst this country has seen in the last 40 years.

Our Federal Government has become so bloated and fat that Jackson wouldn't recognize it. Lines of responsibility between the levels of government have blurred beyond distinction. The tax and spend policies of the past have dragged this economy into a painful recession, throwing millions of Americans out of work and sending interest rates soaring. I have just come, today, from addressing the legislature in Alabama, where the unemployment rate is 14.3. I know while it's not quite that bad, it's very severe here in your State.

We've strayed far from the path that was blazed for us by this frontier President who believed so much in the freedom and dignity of the common man. We got in this predicament precisely because our leaders forgot what you know so well in Tennessee: that we built this nation on individual genius, courage, and effort. Our greatness comes from the kind of character found in the people who made their homes in the hills and fields of Tennessee, not far from the handiwork of professional spenders dispensing the Federal dole in Washington, D.C.

We've gone astray from our first principles. The Federal Government has, at great cost, been attempting to perform tasks that are not its proper function. Oh, those who led us down that path had good intentions; they just didn't see how far they were taking us from the Constitution. So, today we seek to restore the 10th amendment, which says the Federal Government will do only those things called for in the Constitution and all other powers shall remain with the States or with the people.

Government's first duty is to protect the people, not run their lives. While the Federal Government has been assuming an even larger role in our daily lives, it has devoted a smaller and smaller portion of its resources to the one area for which it is clearly, solely responsible -- our national defense.

Nothing tells the story half so well as our changing budget priorities. In 1962 defense spending took 46 percent of all Federal spending, while social programs accounted for 29 percent. Today those numbers have been reversed. Today 29 percent of the budget is for defense, while more than 50 percent is spent on the social programs that mushroomed during the Great Society.

In the last 10 years, Federal spending has increased more than 300 percent. That means it's tripled. Medicaid and Medicare have gone up by more than 500 percent. Food stamps, in 15 years, have increased by 16,000 percent. And while this was going on, our soldiers were cannibalizing equipment for spare parts, and the readiness of our Armed Forces began to decline.

I grew up in the Depression. I watched one Christmas Eve as my father opened what he thought was a greeting from his employer, only to find out it was a pink slip and that he no longer had a job. I know the humiliation that every family feels when the head of the household can't find work, and I know there are times when only government can help.

But let us not confuse the ideals that launched the last 40 years of uncontrolled government growth with the mismanagement and waste that has resulted. We must recognize the good we have done, but also the damage that is mounting so fast we soon may be unable to undo it.

These are not easy times for any of us -- whether we're elected officials trying to do our best for the people we serve, or average, working Americans trying to make ends meet and build a better future. But that's exactly why this is such an important time for us and our country. It has fallen to our generation, in our day, to make basic choices and right basic wrongs that will affect not only our futures but the futures of so many American generations to come.

To the young couple who wants to buy their own home but can't afford today's interest rates, I have a simple message: Our whole program for economic recovery is geared to a healthier economy that will have lower interest rates and make the dream of your own home come true.

To the laborer looking for work in a tight job market: It isn't easy today, because we're suffering from generations of government over-taxing and over-spending. Our whole program is geared to generating new jobs and new opportunity for you and for all the working people of this nation.

To the pensioners and senior citizens who are pinched by inflation: We've finally begun to break the back of inflation. I promise you, we're going to hold the line on government spending and taxing so that inflation will never again become a nightmare for the working and retired people of America.

To the young and the disadvantaged of our country who may fear that government is "turning its back" on them: We are not. We're doing everything we can to create an economy and a society in which there are work and opportunity for all who are willing to try, compassion for those who cannot, upward mobility for all who still dream the American dream.

Ours is not a negative administration trying to turn back the clock. That's what some of our opponents would like to do -- to go back to the bankrupt policies of the past. Our goal is to undo the damage of the big-taxing, big-spending policies that have put average Americans of every race and creed, from every part of the country, into the financial bind they feel today.

We are determined to change things for the better, to make America work again. But we can't do that through more spending and more taxing; that's how we got into this mess to begin with. We've got to return to the people more of the resources that have been gobbled up by big government.

Now, our policy isn't a narrow party position for some vague theory; it's common sense, and it's humanitarian. It is designed to help people, not special interests, in or out of government.

The budget monster has been raging out of control. We've proposed a plan to rein it in, to cut back the growth of spending. We welcome any proposal to cut even more, as long as it doesn't jeopardize our security. We can no longer choose between national security and national welfare -- the two have become one and the same.

We must strive to balance the budget, of course, but not at the cost of our freedom. America's survival requires that we go forward with our defense spending program. The most sobering experience I've had in this job is learning of the growing danger that we face. Even with the defense budget that we've proposed, we will not begin to close the gap with the Soviet Union until the middle of this decade -- or later.

We in America seek to live in peace. War is repugnant, and we're rightly awed by forces of nuclear destruction in the world today. When I accepted my party's nomination for this office, I said we must not be naive or foolish. Four times in my lifetime America has gone to war, sending its young men to die on foreign soil, and never once did we go to war because we were too strong. Our challenge today is to ensure that foreign aggressors are not tempted again by a false perception of American weakness.

We've made clear our commitment to peace and stability in the world and our willingness to negotiate mutual arms reduction with potential adversaries. But no American President must ever sit across the negotiating table from someone dedicated to the destruction of our way of life unless our military strength is such that those on the other side of the table have a darn good reason to legitimately negotiate a reduction of weapons for their own feeling of security.

It is being argued that we should cut defense spending to reduce the deficit. Well, if we eliminated all of the major weapons programs that are scheduled in this budget, we would reduce next year's giant deficit by only \$6\1/2\ billion in our \$3 trillion economy. Most of the money in our defense budget is not for newfangled equipment or the latest in weaponry; most of it will go for essential manpower, maintenance, and readiness. The American people expect their planes to fly, their ships to sail, and their helicopters to stay aloft. There will be no retreat in the commitment of this administration to make sure that they do.

Let me depart from my text for a moment to address a subject of profound importance to all of us -- the control of nuclear arms. There's been a considerable amount of comment on this subject recently, and just last week a well-meaning proposal was put forth by several Senators and Members of the Congress. It called for a freeze at current levels of nuclear arms on both sides. Well, let me be very clear on where I stand. A freeze simply isn't good enough, because it doesn't go far enough. We must get beyond a freeze to insist on real reductions in nuclear arms.

You'll recall that last November 18th, I called for the Soviet Union to dismantle their missiles aimed at Western Europe. In return, we would forego any deployment of corresponding systems that we were planning. The United States stands firmly behind that proposal today, and our negotiators recently put it on the table in Geneva.

Well, let us also be clear about something else. A nuclear freeze at this time would legitimize a position of great advantage for the Soviets. They would have no incentive to make actual reductions. In Europe, for example, their forces are greater than ours by a factor of at least 3 to 1, and some estimate it to be at least 6 to 1. A freeze would leave us and our allies on very thin ice, and as President, I will never permit that.

We must not delude ourselves about the Soviets. It's especially striking to me that on November 18th, when I called for an elimination of intermediate-range missiles in Europe, the Soviets had 250 SS - 20 missiles deployed with 750 warheads -- all aimed at the cities and the population centers of Europe. Today, less than 4 months later, and while we're negotiating, the Soviets have 300 SS - 20 missiles deployed with 900 warheads. That's the nature of the threat we face.

So I say, yes, let us as a people take the lead in preserving peace and a safer world for mankind. But let us do so not just with a good heart, but with a clear head. The United States will continue negotiating for significant, verifiable reductions in nuclear armaments, in Geneva and beyond.

I can assure you that as we develop our position on strategic arms reductions, our objective will be to achieve real reductions, and I would welcome your support as we pursue the course of peace.

Now, there are others who say that the only way to balance the budget is to raise your taxes. Our taxes went up by more than 200 percent in the last 10 years, and during those 10 years we ran up the biggest string of budget deficits in our history. Now, can they believe it would be any different at this time?

Oppressive taxation is like a ball and chain on our economy, weighing it down by discouraging initiative, by punishing hard work, by making investment no longer worth the risk. When President Johnson asked for increased taxes to balance the budget, he had a surplus that first year. But within 2 years, the deficits were back, big as ever. Quick fixes are not the answer to what ails our economy.

We think we have replaced patchwork policy with a long-term program for economic recovery that will work, if we can find the courage and patience to let it work.

Last year, an overwhelming majority of the Congress joined in a bipartisan effort to cut taxes, cut the budget, cut regulations, and begin the process of returning power and resources to the States. Today, an informal poll reveals that some who didn't support that effort are not only opposed to the further cuts that we believe must be made, they're talking of adding almost \$30 billion to the budget that we have sent up to the Congress. They would raise taxes to reduce the deficit.

Well, the American people are already taxed up to their eyeballs. Our budget deficit didn't come about because we're not taxing enough; we've got a deficit because we spend too much.

I haven't given up on a balanced budget. I still believe, as I have since we started spending more than we took in, that deficits have been a plague on our economy. But the cure lies in reducing the size of government, in controlling programs that heretofore have been labeled "uncontrollable." Now, Lord knows I want to erase the red ink from the bottom line of the budget, but not by taking more money from the working people in order to do it. We must not raise taxes on men and women who are already taking pay cuts just to keep their jobs.

Now, many of the same people who want to raise your taxes, who don't believe that you should be able to keep a little more of your own money, also don't trust you to run your own affairs.

These same people, who over the decades have pushed this country to the point of economic collapse, don't trust you to show compassion to your needy or justice to your disadvantaged. They consider statehouses, such as this one, to be the backwater of American politics.

Well, I've got news for them. Here in Tennessee you've always had a balanced budget. You tell me who is the better manager. [Applause] Thank you.

For too long, too many of our leaders have been afraid to trust the people who sent them to office. As they hoarded power in Washington, our economy came unglued, our productivity sank, and unemployment hit the roof. Currents of dissatisfaction are running deep in this land. Those who ignore them do so at their peril. The naysayers, those who are resisting our drive to return our government and our economy to the people, are defending the status quo, and as we all know, that is a Latin phrase -- status quo -- for "the mess we're in." [Laughter]

A citizen with a problem should be able to take a bus to city hall for an answer, he shouldn't have to take a jet to Washington. Removing the possibility of solving problems where they occur, forcing Americans to accept the dictates of a faraway bureaucracy has to be one of the more serious mistakes of this century.

We've proposed the broad outlines of a plan to restore accountability to government. It includes the transfer to our States of more than 40 Federal programs in the areas of education, transportation, community development, and social services. And we want to send back to you the tax sources to pay for them as well. The centerpiece of the proposal is the almost dollar-for-dollar swap of two of the largest areas of welfare. The Federal Government would take over Medicaid in exchange for State assumption of Aid to Families with Dependent Children and food stamps.

Now, this proposal is still in the planning stage. I'm looking forward to working with you in the weeks and months ahead as we develop the details and discuss the alternatives that will make it work. But there is one aspect on which all should be clear: We will not turn our backs on people, communities, or States in need of help. We will not create winners and losers, turning States and regions against each other. Our goal has been and will remain to bring prosperity to all Americans in every part of our country. We will hold fast to the guarantees of equal justice and opportunity for all Americans. We will protect those precious civil rights that define what it is to be an American.

Fifteen years ago, a young Senator from Tennessee rose to take the floor of the United States Senate. He said, "I believe . . . the most urgent . . . problem confronting this Republic today is the threat to the traditional system of federalism." Such a system, he said, has produced the most good for the most people in the history of this nation. The future of our country depends on our ability to preserve this idea of partnership.

The Senator was Howard Baker, and his right-hand man -- [applause] -- and his right-hand helper at that time was an up-and-coming congressional aide by the name of Lamar Alexander.

Well, nearly 140 years before Howard made his plea in the Senate, another Tennessean rose in Washington to speak on the same subject -- Andrew Jackson. Nowhere was the forthrightness for which he was famous more evident than at that Jefferson Day banquet in the spring of 1830. Rumors of secession swept the city. In the crowded banquet room of the Indian Queen Hotel, 24 men rose to toast the dissolution of the Union. And then the President rose to his ramrod-straight six-foot-one, and beneath his thick brush of iron-grey hair, his eyes fixed as bright and fierce as an eagle's on John C. Calhoun. He said, ``Our Federal Union: it must be preserved." They were only seven words, but they were among the most important any American has ever spoken.

As history passes, we find our system of government pulled and twisted, first in this direction and then in that. Jackson's contemporaries sought to destroy it by tipping the balance too far toward the States. In our time, it is threatened by those who would place all the weight in a centralized National Government.

Like Jackson, we must cleave to that well-charted course first laid out for us by our Founding Fathers. Like Jackson, we must govern through coalition, trusting in the people who sent us to office.

In this time when we and our people are so severely tested, it will help to remember the courage that President Jackson could summon from the convictions in his heart. Let us draw on the same strength as we face the hard decisions ahead, as we withstand the swirling tides of changing political trends. Like Jackson, let us simply do what is right to preserve our Federal Union, which is in fact a federation of sovereign States. This is the last, best hope of man on Earth.

God bless you, and thank you very much.

Note: The President spoke at 3:02 p.m. in the Capitol Building.

Upon arrival in Tennessee earlier in the afternoon, the President visited The Hermitage, the 625-acre estate of President Andrew Jackson. Located approximately 12 miles east of Nashville, the mansion and farm are preserved today much as they were in President Jackson's time. President Reagan participated in a wreath-laying ceremony, commemorating the birthday anniversary of President Jackson, at the tomb of the former President, which is located in a garden near the mansion.

Following his address to the State legislature, the President attended a fundraising reception for the Tennessee Republican Party at the Radisson Plaza Hotel in Nashville. He then traveled on Air Force One to Oklahoma City, Okla., where he attended a fundraising reception for the Oklahoma Republican Party at the Skirvin Plaza Hotel. He remained overnight at the hotel.