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SCHOOL OF LAW

NORTH CAROLINA LAW REVIEW

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Volume 67 | Number 4

Article 3

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4-1-1989

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John Sanders

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### Recommended Citation

John Sanders, *Albert Coates: Institution Builder*, 67 N.C. L. REV. 747 (1989).

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# ALBERT COATES: INSTITUTION BUILDER

JOHN SANDERS†

Let it be said in the beginning that but for Albert Coates, there would have been no Institute of Government.

But institutions are not created *in vacuo* or *in vitro*. They are the products, first, of time, place, circumstances, and resources, and second, of persons who have the intelligence, skill, energy, and perseverance to take advantage of those first four factors to accomplish the act of creation and to sustain the institution, once in being. So it was with the Institute of Government.

Mr. Coates came to maturity in the hopeful years of the Progressive Era of American politics, when the conviction was widely shared that the public institutions of the nation were perfectible, and that perfecting them was worthy of the best efforts of the best citizens. He idolized President Edward Kidder Graham, whose eloquently articulated ideal it was to put the resources of this University to the service of the people of the whole State. And he was a student of Professor Eugene Cunningham Branson, who in nineteen years on the faculty of this University made the governmental, social, and economic institutions of the State of North Carolina and its communities legitimate subjects of research by professors and of study by students.

Joining the Law School faculty in 1923, Mr. Coates found routine law school teaching to provide an inadequate outlet for his high energy and ambition for service. The conviction grew upon him, as he studied criminal law and government administration generally, that the public officials of this State and its counties and cities had a deep need for organized instruction, research, and advice, and that meeting that need was not one man's job but a task for a corps of able scholar-teacher-writer-advisers.

His early hope was to enlarge the scope of the Law School to include that public service role in addition to the traditional one of preparing students for law practice. The Dean and faculty of the Law School concluded otherwise. The Great Depression was on, the University's budget was being repeatedly cut and with it faculty salaries, and there was no money for new ventures. There were philosophical objections as well. The Law School's decision proved to be a fortunate one, for within the Law School the Institute of Government (or the idea that became the Institute) could never have flourished as ultimately it did; it would always have been subordinated to the primary teaching mission of the Law School and the professional interests of its faculty.

Undaunted, Mr. Coates, while retaining his tenured Law School professorship, launched the Institute in 1931-32 as a personal enterprise. It was sustained for a decade by his own and Mrs. Coates's labor and means and the generous

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† Director and Professor of Public Law and Government, Institute of Government, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; A.B. 1950, J.D. 1954 University of North Carolina.

help of several publicspirited citizens of the State, until in 1942, on his petition, it was incorporated into the University.

Mr. Coates's achievements in establishing the Institute and sustaining it for thirty-one years as Director were two- fold.

First, he perceptively conceived and advocated with eloquence, unrelenting vigor, and absolute conviction the *idea* of the Institute of Government. He advocated it to the donors whose gifts helped bring it into being and kept it going in the 1930s; to the University and state officials who assumed financial responsibility for it from 1942 forward; to Margaret Rutledge Knapp and the Joseph Palmer Knapp Foundation, whence came in 1953 a \$500,000 grant, matched by a like amount from the General Assembly, to build and furnish the Knapp Building; and to the many men and women who on his invitation chose to cast life and lot with the Institute of Government.

And so we have come to his second major achievement: Between 1933 and 1962, he persuaded four score men and women to believe in his dream, to make it their own, and to invest in it their best efforts for a few years or for a professional lifetime. For most of that period, they came with no more job security than their faith in him afforded, for not until 1957 did they acquire full faculty status.

To the directorship of the Institute of Government, Mr. Coates brought a strong proprietary sense, and he exercised close supervision over some elements of its Program, notably criminal law and its enforcement. Yet most of those who shared the Institute's labor, and especially those who stayed long at the task, found within it opportunities for individual and creative work that provided rewards that offset the many hours it required. From 1933 onward, they gave life and substance to the Director's rubrics about the teaching, research, writing, publishing, and advisory mission of the Institute.

The most remarkable tribute to Mr. Coates's achievement as an institution builder is the fact that the people picked to do the Institute's service were able to recruit others to the dream, and they to recruit others in turn; that more than a quarter of a century after he left its directorship, the Institute still grows and thrives and serves; and that today, the thirty-six men and women of its faculty, most of whom never knew Albert Coates, are still moving to the measure of his thought.