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WILLIAM BRANTLEY AYCOCK: UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATOR 1957-1964

JAMES L. GODFREY†

In 1957 William Aycock was appointed Chancellor of the University of North Carolina. He had become a member of the faculty of the law school nine years earlier and at the time of his appointment was on leave serving as a visiting Professor of Law at the University of Virginia. Before beginning his duties at the University of North Carolina School of Law, he had been a graduate student in the History Department and had earned his Masters Degree in United States history. Following this he had undertaken the study of law with such success that immediately following his graduation he was invited to become a member of the law faculty. At the moment he became Chancellor he stood on the threshold of becoming a scholar and teacher of law of national eminence. For those who knew him his appointment aroused hopes of great expectations for the University. But there were many who did not know him and, along with discreet encomiums, there was the fear that he lacked experience as an educational administrator.

These fears were proved unfounded. It was gradually realized that earlier experience—often overvalued—could in this particular post be a disadvantage. After all, the Chancellorship was an in-between office. Although its occupant was the administrative head of the University in Chapel Hill, he served under the general oversight and authority of the President of the University. As Aycock himself, in a 1958 address to the Faculty Club, put it, “The development of this superstructure (the “Consolidated University”) leaves the executive head of this institution in the middle. He is the narrow neck in the administrative hour glass. . . . The executive head of an institution cannot provide flexibility in excess of that which is intrusted to him.” At this time such an arrangement in higher education was unusual. It was a relationship that an administrator with experience from another campus might not have understood. It was far better that the new man understand the restrictions of the office than that he have had experience in an alien situation.

The lack of experience was also offset by the tremendous advantage of having someone in the office who knew the peculiarities and habits of the campus. In short, Aycock knew what was below him as well as what was above. As a former student and faculty member, Aycock knew that over the decades—one could almost say centuries—the University had acquired a character of its own. Its procedures were usually personal rather than formal and much of its success as an educational institution rested in the fact that its faculty considered itself a

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partner in the formulation of its policies and in the administration of its educational affairs. Gordon Gray, who at an earlier time was Secretary of the Army and later the President of the "Consolidated" University, once said that the positions of Secretary of the Army and President of the University were somewhat alike with the main difference being that the faculty had no one below the rank of general. Clearly in the chancellorship the value of experience needed to be matched by the art of diplomacy.

To his new post Aycock brought additional assets. He had a clear perception of what the mission of a state university should be and he possessed innate personal qualities of the highest order. He was proud of the high position of the University as he came in and was determined to leave it higher as he went out, which he thought he would do in five years. As it turned out he gave the University two bonus years. His mind was clear about the purpose of the school: it existed to teach, to do research, and to perform services of an appropriate nature for the state. This trilogy would command universal agreement, though there is the obvious question of ranking the three duties in terms of their importance. If a choice had to be made, Aycock would probably have put teaching first. He saw the undergraduates as the "bloodstream of the University," with the professional and research activities of the University suffering or benefiting from the excellence of the work done at that level. He also saw clearly that "we cannot do all that we are free to undertake." This, as he saw it, put a premium upon prudent exercise of choices, careful planning, and effective use of resources. But the desirable things just mentioned cannot be done without academic freedom for the University, which is a natural house for "diversity, controversy and tolerance." All of this, of course, must take place within the confines of the law, which if successfully breached would turn all to chaos.

It was apparent as Aycock took office that the University could expect several years of unusual growth. How could this be accommodated without diverting the desire for increased excellence? Good administration would require that this growth be accommodated without diluting the recognized demands of teaching, research, and service. Aycock recognized that growth must be orderly, therefore subject to foresight and planning, and that additional resources commensurate with the growth must be provided.

It can be said that there was nothing unusual about all this. That is true. Basically it meant taking something already good and making it better. Aycock's brilliance was not in conceptualizing the proper role of this University but in achieving the desired level of higher performance. Although many influences would enter into the result, much would depend on the administrative style of the new Chancellor.

Aycock's style would come from his personal qualities. One of the first things to be noted was his devotion to hard work. Only the members of his household knew when his day began; none of his colleagues saw him come to work nor too often saw him leave. His hours when alone were devoted to a contemplation of what had been done, of what was being done, and of what needed to be done. Work and his plans for the University were a flow kept going

by energy and attention. As the University moved into its working day he became accessible to his colleagues, who were warmly invited to see him on institutional affairs that could not be taken care of at one of the provided lower levels or when such a level had failed to provide an acceptable answer. He established himself as the last resort within the University for "tender consciences" and consistently practiced an "open door" policy.

Once each week—and more often if necessary—he met with his so-called cabinet. In this group there was a free exchange of information amongst lieutenants who had been delegated authority for major sections of the campus and a full discussion of the issue or problem of the moment. The Chancellor heard from it, in its various voices, expressions of opinion arising from different areas of the University. It also provided a convenient time for the assignment of tasks and for a review of formal requests from the departments and schools. Members of the cabinet understood they were there to help but not to supplant the Chancellor and that any decisions made would be fully his. It was also clear that what was said would be given full consideration by a Chancellor whose leadership depended not upon his office but upon good judgment shown in his decisions and the openness and fairness with which he dealt with his colleagues. Prepared by ample information he had the courage to act and the determination to see to it that the actions had desired results. It may have been his legal training, but more likely it was born in him to isolate "the issue" and to deal with problems from the inside out. The only thing that could distract him was compassion and this was exercised only on behalf of the most deserving. One of his gravest concerns was to avoid being confronted with some University problems that could have been foreseen. A conspicuous advocate of the adage that "a stitch in time saves nine," he was anxious to anticipate the future and to meet it on terms favorable to the University or at least as much so as possible. In this he was more successful than one might suspect.

The same "openness" Aycock showed to his colleagues was also available to the students. As he saw it, they were the basic reason for the rest of us to be here. There was a warmth, strength, and friendly energy about him that they found attractive. This was enhanced by the fact that he always understood them though he did not always agree with them. But even when agreement had not been reached there never appeared to be a sense that students and administration were at odds.

His concern went beyond the campus and its occupants to those who had been here in earlier years and to the state as a whole. He was very generous with his time in meeting with and talking to alumni groups about the University and its welfare or to any gathering of North Carolinians about the relationship of the University to the state. It would have been difficult for him to disassociate the good fortune of the University from that of the state as a whole. The aspirations of the University were national, but its roots and its prospects for growth were fixed in the soil of North Carolina.

In the past the state had been kind in the level of financial support offered Chapel Hill. Aycock was determined that the University continue to deserve

adequate resources not only to sustain its existing enrollments and work but to increase its size and elevate its quality of performance. During his administration the student body grew at an average of five hundred students per year. The budget should provide support for faculty and facilities to take care of the increased size. The University, moreover, should receive its personnel budget in such a form as to give the University the major voice in determining the internal use and distribution of the money. This was done. The medical and academic budgets were still voted separately by the Legislature, but the academic budget, which had previously been passed as several legislative acts, was now combined and voted as one with the University then determining its internal use. This was a boon for the University as it enabled the Chancellor—and his successors—to make a more judicious employment of the University's resources.

The history of an administrative period in a large University is seldom an account of how one or two large issues were managed. Rather it is a reckoning of how a thousand and one small things were handled. Was this done in such a way that the University came closer to fulfilling its true function? Did the faculty find its morale heightened and its desire to fulfill its responsibilities increased? Did the state get the assurance that its interests were advanced? And did its students come with anticipation and leave with their finest hopes satisfied? All of these tests yielded to the superb administrative talents of Bill Aycock. Let it be said: he found it good—he left it better, much better!