



## Albert Coates: Bad Timing, Good Timing

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Albert Coates was determined to realize his vision for the Institute of Government, and he certainly wasn't going to let something like the Great Depression stand in his way. According to his biographer, Howard Covington, "Coates could not have picked a less propitious time to attempt to expand his law school classroom into a teaching laboratory and resource for state and local government."

Governor O. Max Gardner had just cut all state spending, including pay for university professors, by ten percent. Local governments ran out of money and couldn't afford to pay their debts—39 counties and 78 cities were effectively bankrupt. The University was facing a \$200,000 cut to its budget, and Albert estimated that it would cost at least \$50,000 per year just to get the Institute organized. Yet it is clear that his "idea captured the attention of those concerned about the growing financial crises in many communities around the state." Albert argued that local government financial problems largely were the result of management that was "inexperienced, inefficient, and ignorant of cost-saving measures." Local leaders responded to his proposed program because they "were looking for lifelines in the face of citizen anger and resentment over the scandals in municipal affairs." Albert's timing was bad because there were no resources to start an ambitious new program, but his timing was good because there was a consensus about the need for greater professionalism and reform in government.

We are facing the toughest economic times many of us have known, but they are nothing compared to the circumstances that confronted North Carolina when Albert was trying to establish the Institute of Government. He ignored "such apparent limitations as manpower, money, or institutional support." We will have significantly less state money in the future to carry out our mission, and yet somehow we must continue advancing the School's work. In his first issue of *Popular Government*, Albert explained why great movements are not deterred in the pursuit of their cause. "And in them is revealed a spirit of a people which sees in disaster only a challenge the brighter to burn and which when darkness hedges it about builds in itself a dwelling place of light. We are the heirs of that tradition." As we try to meet the needs of public officials and simultaneously absorb budget cuts, it may help to remember that we are heirs to that same tradition.