

Remembering Bill Friday: "Let Me Take That Out Of Your Worry Box"

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Many things will be written in the coming days about President Friday's impact on the University and on North Carolina. Few people have combined such a common touch with an uncommon talent. The breadth and depth of his influence is difficult to fully comprehend, partly because so much of his work happened behind the scenes.

One of the best parts of my job has been the occasional opportunity to interact with him. He knew Mr. and Mrs. Coates from the early days of the Institute of Government and he was a strong supporter. He knew John Sanders and drew on his expertise in a variety of formal and informal roles. Given his love for North Carolina, it is not surprising that President Friday embraced our mission.

The North Carolina Progress Board was an idea that President Friday naturally supported and he encouraged its creation in 1995. The Board was established in state government to develop statewide goals, targets, and measures for gauging progress for North Carolina. It aligned with President Friday's optimistic view of the world, a view supported by a deep belief that it lies within our power to improve the lives of all North Carolinians. He believed that it was our individual and collective responsibility to exercise that power.



In July 1997 President Friday and Governor Hunt asked the Institute of Government to assume responsibility for the Progress Board because it was not reaching its full potential within the Department of Administration. We conducted a thorough review and in the end recommended that the Board be established “as a not-for-profit corporation to ensure its substantial independence.” David Ammons and John Stephens worked with others to produce a thoughtful report, and they worked with a steering committee that reviewed our research and critiqued our recommendations. The committee included President Friday and other thoughtful leaders, including our own Norma Houston.



My purpose here is not to go into detail about the Progress Board, but instead to make a few points about President Friday. I still remember the initial phone call from him suggesting that the Institute offered “the perfect home” for the Board. He argued that its location in a state executive agency was one reason why legislators were not taking it seriously. He believed that we would give the Board and its recommendations much needed credibility. President Friday thought that the Institute’s nonpartisan history, along with our unwillingness to advocate for policy outcomes, positioned us perfectly to make the Progress Board an effective force for good in North Carolina.

Technically the request to study the Progress Board came from Governor Hunt, but I always believed that President Friday was the most important audience for our report. In my mind he occupied a position higher than any governor and I did not want to disappoint him. He and I talked several times about the Board’s need to educate (lobby) future legislators and governors to adopt whatever policies were necessary to meet its stated goals. If we abandoned our neutrality to advocate for the goals of the Progress Board, even if only indirectly through a loose affiliation with the Board, I expressed my concern that the Institute would lose its reputation for objectivity. One goal of the study was to recommend the best option for the Board, but an equally important goal for me was to convince President Friday that we were not that option.



I still remember our last conversation about the Progress Board. President Friday told me that he had come to appreciate the risk to the Institute and that it was not a risk worth taking. The Progress Board was the most recent in a series of statewide initiatives that he had worked on to improve North Carolina. He believed strongly in the possibility of improvement through statewide visioning efforts, and in some sense the Progress Board represented his final attempt at that approach.



President Friday and President Kennedy in Kenan Stadium

I was impressed with how carefully he was willing to listen to the concerns of an inexperienced administrator, and how he was willing to focus on long-term interests. Unlike many influential people, President Friday was able to look beyond his own short-term interests and hear things that didn't support his position. He told me that our credibility is what had prompted him to call in the first place. He now recognized that his suggestion might undermine that very credibility, and he cared too much about the importance of our mission to let that happen. I was nervous about the outcome, but President Friday comforted me by saying, "Don't worry about this anymore. I'm taking it out of your worry box."

President Friday called on us for assistance many times after we declined take over the Progress Board, and he continued to support the Institute and the School. He was an early supporter of the Civic Education Consortium, which was entirely consistent with his belief in the importance of educating young people for public service.



President Friday Meeting with Faculty Member Rachel Willis's Students

I was with him on a Consortium panel for teachers and students early in its history. Before the panel we talked briefly about a book I was reading by Doris Kearns Goodwin? *No Ordinary Time*. It was about Franklin Roosevelt and America during World War II. President Friday told me about the time he had escorted Eleanor Roosevelt during a visit to Carolina. He said that the experience had been exhausting because she wanted to meet with everyone and she had unbelievable stamina. On the final morning of her visit he was waiting for her in the lobby of the Carolina Inn. He was sitting on a sofa, exhausted, with his back to the elevator. Mrs. Roosevelt approached him from behind, placed her hand on his tired shoulder, and said: "Don't worry. It is nearly over."





Eleanor Roosevelt with Frank Porter Graham in Memorial Hall

I loved that story at the time as he laughed in remembering it, and I love it now. Given his own overflowing schedule over a long and full life, it was hard for me to imagine President Friday in anything approaching a state of exhaustion. He was driven by a passion to improve the lives of others. Whenever he talked to students, he would make the following statement: "Millions of North Carolinians living in poverty pay taxes to support your education. What are you going to do to pay them back?" It is now over for President Friday, but his example inspires us to continue our mission of improving the lives of North Carolinians by improving their government. That is how we pay them back. That is how we pay him back. He understood and supported our mission, and he never took it for granted. Thanks for all that you do.



President and Mrs. Friday