



Tackling the Hardest Problems

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This past week was the 50th anniversary of a speech by President Kennedy at Rice University in which he talked about our national “quest for knowledge and progress” and connected it to the exploration of space. He argued that “[w]e set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained, and new rights to be won, and they must be won and used for the progress of all people.” It was especially fitting that he spoke at a university. The School is in the knowledge business and our mission is to help government work as effectively as possible to make progress for everyone.

This inspiring passage from President Kennedy’s speech on September 12, 1962 was to become the most memorable: “But why, some say, the moon? Why choose this as our goal? And they may well ask why climb the highest mountain? Why, 35 years ago, fly the Atlantic? Why does Rice play Texas? We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.”

President Kennedy focused on the defining character of our country?our historic willingness to commit ourselves to the greatest challenges because they test our ability, increase our resolve, and make us better. We set goals that are hard because they hold the potential for having the greatest impact. Today people might talk about setting “big, hairy, audacious goals” or solving “wicked problems.” Whatever language is used, the idea is to take on things that matter and not shy away because they seem daunting.

Albert and Gladys Coates created the Institute of Government over 80 years ago because they believed it could be important for North Carolina, and they persevered in the face of enormous obstacles. Creating the Institute was a hard thing, not an easy thing. Many faculty and staff members before us have worked hard to advance their vision.

Obviously we are not attempting anything as technically challenging or dramatic as putting someone on the Moon. We are trying to improve government, however, at a time when skepticism about all branches of government is at an all-time high. At a time when partisan differences make it extremely difficult to make progress, and increasingly those differences are affecting local government. And we are doing it when fewer resources are available. It may not be as tough as landing Neil Armstrong on the Moon, but it is far from easy.

I continue to see an enormous commitment to meeting those challenges in the work of our faculty and staff today. We need to keep pushing ourselves to do those things that can have the greatest impact?and not shy away because it may be hard or because success is not guaranteed. That is true for faculty and it also is true for our professional staff. No astronaut ever made it into space,



let alone walked on the Moon, without the hard work of thousands of NASA workers whose feet never left the Earth.

At a time when our University is being criticized for the poor judgment of a few people, it is important to recognize the good and dedicated work being done by so many people at the School and at Carolina. You are making a difference at a challenging time. I appreciate it and so do many, many state, local, and court officials in North Carolina.