



Albert Coates: The Early Vision

Author : Mike Smith

Categories : [SOG History](#)

Date : June 1, 2009

I am reading a draft biography of Albert Coates by Howard Covington, who co-authored a terrific [biography of Terry Sanford](#). Covington is a good writer and he does a nice job of tracing the early origins of the Institute of Government. Albert wrote, published, and distributed the first issue of *Popular Government* before the Institute of Government was established. The entire 70-page issue was devoted to Albert's preliminary study of the North Carolina criminal justice system. According to Covington:

"Popular Government was a one-song hymnal in the Coates church of criminal law. He declared that the citizens of North Carolina were ill-served by a criminal justice system that suffered from the inefficiency of overlapping jurisdictions, the unfettered discretion of prosecutors and judges who dispensed unequal justice, and law enforcement officers who were not properly trained to do their jobs. The pamphlet was Coates's call for a detailed analysis of the entire justice apparatus. Coates argued for the application of scientific methods in the analysis of how police answered calls and handled arrests, the decisions of district attorneys in prosecuting crimes and the sentencing behavior of judges, as well as the fairness of the penal system."

It is interesting that Albert's original vision for the Institute involved much more than training, writing, and advising on current legal issues. It involved more than making sure that officials understood their legal and administrative responsibilities. His idea for the Institute included "the study of governmental institutions and processes in North Carolina." In other words, it encompassed making sure that the systems and processes themselves were good and effective. I was struck by how much this sounded like one of the [core areas of work](#) we have identified: Improving the structure, organization, equity, and effectiveness of governmental systems and processes. We continue to discuss the extent to which the School should be more involved in public policy, and I find it fascinating that Albert originally considered it a part of the Institute's mission. He didn't call it public policy, and his early thinking about the Institute should not control our current work, but it is interesting. Don't you think?