



The Great Reversal

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When Howard Covington interviewed me for his Albert Coates biography, he asked if I'd read *The Great Reversal*. I had never heard of it. Neither had John Sanders nor Joe Ferrell. The intrepid Alex Hess tracked down a copy for me in the papers of Bill Cochrane (a former faculty member) in the Southern Historical Collection. *The Great Reversal* is a 162-page complaint that Coates wrote toward the very end of his life, arguing that his successors had betrayed his original vision for the Institute of Government. It was written for history—and for the biographer who ultimately found it. The document is remarkable and surpassingly sad.

When Coates stepped down as Director in 1962, the unhappy victim of mandatory retirement, he made the following promise to public officials: “[Y]ou may expect the services of the Institute of Government . . . to grow and multiply . . . as every man on the staff builds his division of the Institute to a size as great as the Institute of Government today, and the whole continues to be greater than the sum of all its parts.” Twenty years later he read in *Popular Government* that his colleagues subsequently had made a conscious decision to “remain a relatively small collegial group of university faculty members.” The “faculty decided to stay relatively small” and it “accepted the growth of other agencies and institutions to provide services to governmental officials.” The faculty “generally felt that [the competition] has been healthy.”

I have not completely finished the document, but Coates clearly intended it to be read as a Shakespearean tragedy. “It slowly dawned on me that the whole thrust of my life and work in the Institute of Government had been rejected and repudiated—not in whim or fancy or caprice, but a after ‘long self-examination’ by able men.” Coates apparently believed that the Institute’s growth should be unlimited—”to grow, and grow, and keep on growing, to meet the governmental needs of the officials and citizens of today, and the youth of today who will be the officials and citizens of tomorrow.” Coates believed that the Institute should have handled all basic law enforcement training rather than the community colleges or the Justice Academy. He saw the Knapp Building as the centerpiece of a growing campus within the university campus. Like the British Empire, Coates imagined that the sun would never set on the Institute of Government.

There are many issues raised by *The Great Reversal*. It is important to know when to let go, which is something that Coates could never do. John Sanders is a model for how to make a graceful exit after committing one’s professional life to leading an organization. John has offered steadfast support and never a word of criticism, even when it almost certainly was deserved. The



appropriate size of the Institute and School has surfaced occasionally as a question over the years. I have never thought that we should decide in the abstract to limit the size of the School, but I also have never thought that we should try to meet all of the needs of North Carolina officials. It will continue to be an issue for us as we make future decisions about the School's impact. What do you think?