



## To Right These Wrongs

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THE NORTH CAROLINA FUND  
AND THE BATTLE TO END  
POVERTY AND INEQUALITY  
IN 1960S AMERICA

Robert R. Korstad & James L. Leloudis

*With photographs by Billy E. Barnes*

# To Right These Wrongs



Includes a DVD of the documentary *Change Comes Knocking: The Story of the North Carolina Fund*

The North Carolina Fund was the model for LBJ's War on Poverty, and its history is analyzed brilliantly in a new book, *To Right These Wrongs*. It is co-authored by Jim Leloudis, a history professor at Carolina, and Robert Korstad, a public policy professor at Duke. The Fund was conceived at the Institute of Government.



Terry Sanford turned to the Institute for help in developing his anti-poverty proposal to the Ford Foundation. On a visit by Foundation officials, “they met with [George] Esser and others at the university’s Institute of Government to brainstorm ways that North Carolina and the foundation might collaborate to develop new approaches to alleviating poverty, in the South and as a model for other communities around the nation.”

Esser had been a faculty member specializing in urban issues and municipal government since 1948. He developed a proposal that invited Ford to fund an “‘all-out assault on poverty,’ the first of its kind in the nation.” They agreed and the North Carolina Fund was created. George Esser took a leave of absence to become the Fund’s executive director and never returned.



George Esser at a North Carolina Fund Staff Retreat

*To Right These Wrongs* begins with an important perspective on poverty by recounting the history of racial politics in North Carolina, beginning with Reconstruction and continuing through the response to *Brown v. Board of Education*. It shows how Terry Sanford came to understand that poverty was not caused by “individual pathologies and cultural deficiencies”, and it could not be eliminated solely by providing black children with greater access to equal education. Instead, poverty was the “product of deliberate efforts to establish an inequitable distribution of power, wealth, and opportunity. To fight poverty, therefore, is to take democracy seriously.”



Terry Sanford Visiting a Black Elementary School in Jacksonville (Can you imagine any other Southern governor doing this or allowing the picture?)

The North Carolina Fund was established in 1963 to provide “social venture capital” for community action programs that would get “the best minds in all local communities around the table and see what kinds of creative ideas they could come up with to solve the problems of poverty.” It soon became obvious that the funded programs were not addressing the root causes of poverty.

As it learned more about the political and structural causes of poverty, particularly the role of institutionalized racial discrimination, the Fund shifted its focus to mobilizing the poor as ‘participating citizens,’ to make them a ‘viable, constructive, competitive’ force.” This meant helping poor people “band together” in order to “bring pressure to bear on critical public policy decisions.” Congress borrowed the community-participation model in creating the Equal Opportunity Act, which required “that all antipoverty efforts promote “maximum feasible participation” by the poor.

This strategy put the Fund staff and their community partners in direct conflict with local elected officials and business leaders. Not only did many white leaders feel threatened generally by newly-empowered poor people, but they saw the Fund’s anti-poverty organizing as indistinguishable from the civil rights movement. The opposition was fierce. *To Right These Wrongs* describes what the North Carolina Fund accomplished and how it came to an end after five tumultuous years. The federal poverty program eventually transitioned into a block grant program controlled by government officials without required participation by the poor.



According to Leloudis and Korstad, the Fund's history reveals a number of lessons about trying to reduce poverty, including: (1) poverty is political, and "[t]o fight poverty, therefore, is to take democracy seriously;" and (2) eradicating poverty "requires activism and advocacy." "It requires moral courage and a willingness to confront the complicity of the affluent in unjust arrangements of privilege and power."

This book is essential reading for anyone interested in learning more about the dynamics of race in North Carolina, especially in the context of community and economic development. It raises uncomfortable questions about the role of government in addressing racial discrimination and poverty. I found myself thinking constantly about the most appropriate role for the School in trying to help resolve these issues. What are the limits on the School's involvement in developing and promoting public policy? How should we approach community and economic development today? What is the role of civic education in helping people understand the importance of involvement in the political process? The book raises many thought-provoking questions for our work and I highly recommend it.