Deil S. Wright Lecture | March 31, 2017
"If You Can't Say Something Nice…"

Good afternoon, and thank you to my friends and colleagues at the School of Government for inviting me to give this year's Deil S. Wright Lecture. Deil Wright was a legend in the fields of Public Administration and Political Science. I'd like take a moment to recognize and thank several folks who have continued his traditions and made this event possible.

Mr. Wright's daughter, Lois, and his sons, David and Mark who are here with us today.

And, Matthew who is not able to be here today.

Members of the Wright Lecture Committee: Chair Kim Nelson, Whitney Afonzo, and Rick Morse—thank you for having me. Thanks to Fidelity also.

I'd also like to recognize UNC Board of Governors Member Alex Mitchell—great to see you here today.

And, last but certainly not least, Dean Mike Smith—thank you for your leadership.

It would be a privilege to be with all of you under any circumstances, but I'm especially honored to be a part of the 50th anniversary celebration of the Masters of Public Administration Program here at Carolina. I love the powerful mission of the MPA — preparing public service leaders — and how it so nicely captures the spirit of the nation's oldest public university.

At the time the University of North Carolina was founded, there was a special emphasis on training the ministers, teachers, and community leaders who would help govern a newly free country and a fledgling, sparsely populated state.

The drafters of our state's original charter knew that our experiment in self-government would demand public service leaders, and they created a University very much for that purpose. So while the MPA is turning 50, I like to think that the core work of the MPA harkens all the way back to 1789.

These days, we have a tendency to take for granted things that work well. You don't think a great deal about your car's engine until it stops running, or your plumbing until it stops flowing, or your oven until it stops heating.

When everything is functioning well, the basic infrastructure of our day-to-day lives fades into the background. We become blind to the enormous amount of technical skill and specialized knowledge that keeps our world running, that supports the lives we've come to expect and enjoy.

Public service leadership is like that, too. We take for granted that our town leaders, our county commissioners, our city managers and our public agency directors know what they're doing. We expect the trash to get collected, the streetlights to come on, the EMS services to get funded, and the parks to be safe and clean.

We expect our taxes to be levied fairly, our property rights to be respected, and our elections to be run with professionalism and care.
We take all of that for granted, but none of it happens by accident. Good governance requires incredible skill and hard work, built from years of expertise and a tradition of service that gets instilled and strengthened over generations.

That's what the MPA program is all about. And that's why I think it's so important that we celebrate anniversaries like this one with full-throated sincerity and appreciation.

Otherwise, we fall into the trap of only thinking about government and public service when it fails us. We risk complacency about the scale of the challenge presented by modern civic infrastructure, and the dedicated expertise needed to manage it.

Effective governance and honest public service are genuine miracles, and they happen every single day thanks to people like you and programs like this. So thank you, truly, for being a part of this proud institution and carrying its traditions out into the world.

When I was asked to give this year's Diel Wright lecture, I said yes immediately because I care about the School of Government, care about the work you all do, and because I've always loved being on this side of a microphone.

One of my first jobs was at a grocery store called Handy Andy in Texas, and I loved nothing more than getting to make announcements over the PA system. Alex Andy…

Anyway, it wasn't until later that I started looking over some of the past lecturers. In the past few years, you've heard from Christie Todd Whitman on the nature of leadership; Virginia Governor Douglas Wilder on courage in public service; Ray LaHood on transformational change; Ray Mabus on maintaining the US Navy in the face of global threats; and Erskine Bowles on the sobering reality of the federal deficit. This is heady stuff!

And I mention all of that because I want to begin this afternoon by talking to you about dog poop and email listservs. (If any of you want your money back at this point, you'll have to talk to Mike Smith afterward.)

A couple of <u>weeks</u> ago, I picked up the Chapel Hill News from the end of my walkway on Sunday morning and immediately noticed a column headlined "On politics and dog poop." Being both a long-time politician and a relatively new dog owner, it's hard to imagine a more relevant piece of journalism for me. So I started in to read.

And in this column, Ted Vaden chronicled a whole series of exchanges about dog etiquette that took place on his neighborhood listserv in Southern Village. People got quite heated on the subject of where pets ought to relieve themselves, and what pet owners ought to do about it, and what ought to happen to both pets and pet owners who don't behave responsibly in such matters.

And after reading this fairly detailed back-and-forth among strangers, I came away thinking — not for the first time — is there really *nothing* that people won't put in an email?

On the one hand, I found it encouraging. If people are willing to send nasty emails about where the neighborhood dogs choose to do their business, then maybe I don't have to worry so much about the nasty emails I get.

But more seriously, I think the listserv dustup points to a wider problem. The ease and anonymity of our technology is enabling a new spirit of ill will and bad faith that is scarring our private lives and hobbling our public institutions.

The online world, which is still a very new part of our democratic experiment, has raced past our long-established habits of political discourse. And unless we find a way to use these new tools for real engagement, I believe we risk eroding the unwritten norms that make our citizen's republic possible.

I recently went to a talk by a psychology professor, someone who researches sleep and stress and how they affect our lives. And aside from telling me that I definitely don't get enough sleep, she said that most people will interpret a *neutral* facial expression — a basic resting face, not scowling or smiling — as a *negative* face.

We're programmed to see a blank face as unsettling. And it's because without additional information, without a definitive facial expression to tell us what a person's intentions might be, we get anxious and interpret it as vaguely hostile—especially these days.

3

In other words, we *need* facial feedback, we rely on nonverbal communication, to reassure us that another person isn't a threat. Without it, we revert to our primal instinct of assuming and fearing the worst.

Think about what happens when someone cuts you off in traffic. The moment another car merges sharply in front of you, or turns suddenly ahead of you, what do you do? If you're anything like me, you curse them with force and creativity.

You assume they did it *on purpose*, that they're selfish or incompetent or probably an outright sociopath who should never have been given a driver's license and really ought to be put in prison long enough to think about the seriousness of their crimes against you.

Now imagine that exact same scenario, but between two pedestrians. If someone cuts you off on the sidewalk, what happens? Probably nothing. Maybe they give an apologetic wave, or say, "So sorry!" before moving on. Maybe they don't notice you at all.

But regardless, you're able to see that they didn't do it on purpose. They didn't choose to cut you off — they were just careless or rushed, as we all are. You forgive them almost instantly, if you even think about it at all.

The difference between these interactions is both simple and profound — one takes place between two anonymous cars, and another takes place between two identifiable humans. And when humans are face-to-face, we mostly manage to be nice to each other. It's why we have road rage, but not sidewalk rage.

The problem is that our online interactions are much more like being cut off in traffic. We're interacting blindly, with none of the reassuring human contact or emotional accountability that governs our in-person lives.

And in the absence of that vital context — where our phones or laptop screens offer nothing but a blank, neutral face — we're inclined to be fearful and suspect the worst.

Fear is our least charitable emotion. When we're fearful of another person's intentions, we feel justified in cutting them off. We may even feel *righteous* in cutting them off, may decide that cutting them off is the only moral and proper course.

It becomes incredibly easy to decide that this disembodied voice, this person-less opinion floating in the ether, deserves to be scorned or silenced. Once you take humanity out of the equation, inhumanity enters quite naturally.

4

If you can imagine the worst in someone else, then it's very easy to place yourself above them.

If fear is our least charitable emotion, then righteousness is our least trustworthy. Few things feel naturally more satisfying than being <u>right</u> about something, and being able to declare someone else <u>wrong</u>.

When we can elevate this state of affairs to a moral principle — I am right because I'm good, and they are wrong because they're not — we can achieve true bliss.
Unfortunately, the craving for righteousness can lead us very far indeed from the true path. The writer Anne Lamott, in her collection of advice to young novelists, captures this quite nicely in quoting a friend of hers. "You can be sure you've created God in your own image when it turns out he hates all the same people you do."

And much too often in our online lives, we're ruling over our own little patch of creation with all the certain judgment of a wronged God.

You may discount all of this as the scolding of an out-of-touch elder — I am obviously not spending my spare hours on SnapChat like my 24 year old daughter— but I think the habits we're developing online are spilling into our real-world discourse.

And it's having an impact on the tenor and quality of our governance at almost every level.

It's affecting our ability to bring new talent and new voices into the public sector. To be sure, taking on difficult issues and dealing with controversy is part of being a public official, and no one thinks public servants ought to be greeted with garlands or songs of praise.

But the level of vitriol we often see directed at those in public life has gotten intense enough to dissuade people from serving.

Not too long after I got to North Carolina, I was leaving the grocery store when someone shouted a fairly profane suggestion at me from about twenty yards away.

This was a perfectly well-dressed adult, carrying his Whole Foods bag to his car, and here he was screaming across a parking lot on a perfectly pleasant Sunday afternoon. He even looked a little surprised, like maybe he meant to Tweet something that ugly but it just came out of his mouth instead.

There have been a handful of instances like that — you may recall that HB2 was passed just after I started this job, so feelings were running high in those early weeks — and almost all of them came as shouts across a parking lot or screamed obscenities across a quad.

The worst insults were hurled from a distance, like the ones tossed around online. Distance and anonymity offer the space to dehumanize.

By contrast, just about every face-to-face interaction I've had, even with people who disagree strongly with something I've said or done, have been civil and constructive. It's in those moments that human relationships reemerge.

Those moments open up the space for minds to get changed, for compromises to emerge, for progress to happen. It's in those face-to-face discussions that we're able to build on the norms of trust and reciprocity that have been learned over centuries, and allow one another the space to speak and listen.

It's easy to click away or close a laptop screen when you get impatient with someone else's voice; it's much harder to get up and walk out of the room. Our social norms encourage us to be decent to one another.

There's a professor here at UNC — Zeynep Tufekci in the School of Information and Library Science — who studies social and political movements across the world, and the kind of communications tools they use.

She's deeply impressed by the ability of activists and organizers to bring huge numbers of people together using online platforms like Facebook and Twitter and WhatsApp and whatever comes after WhatsApp.

But she also points out that these movements don't seem to have a much staying power — they come together quickly, and then they disperse.

That's an excellent model for bringing attention to an important issue or building energy, but it's not especially helpful when it comes to the slow, drawn-out process of governance and policymaking.

When we look at the Civil Rights movement, and the profound and lasting changes it brought to law and life in America, it's astonishing to think of how much effort went into the basic mechanics of organizing.

In those days, they didn't have the benefit of cell phones or email or messaging apps. They didn't even have the means to easily print flyers. So much of the work of planning and organizing marches, rallies, and boycotts had to be done by people, over long hours working and talking and arguing alongside one another.

Real relationships helped forge a lasting movement — a movement that succeeded in changing our country for the better. A movement whose goals became law that withstood the test of time.

I worry that we're trading that kind of meaningful impact for the fleeting satisfaction of online argument. I worry that we're channeling political energy into activities that are almost designed to avoid changing anyone's mind, and only serve to make us feel secure in our own existing beliefs.

This is a challenge you'll have to take up as you become the public service leaders of tomorrow. In the short-term, it means recognizing that the loudest voices are not necessarily the most representative or the most trustworthy.

And in the long-term, it means finding ways to use the new tools of our digital era to create a more sincere form of engagement between citizens and policymakers.

I don't know what that looks like yet, but I can promise you that I'm spending a lot of time thinking about it. And so is my staff. We're Tweeting, sharing online newsletters, writing for websites and newspapers, and by this fall, I hope to be making better use of UNC TV as a means of getting our message out and elevating the work of this University. I'm not at all opposed to making the highest and best use of technology to open up new channels of communication.

But I can tell you — for changing minds and hearing new views, the most effective approach I've found here, has been monthly salon suppers at my house; personal phone calls to people who wrote critical op-eds or online comments; thoughtful letters to people who took the time to write me; and long trips across the state to meet in person with the people who care about this University. If there are truly effective technological shortcuts to that kind of effort, I haven't found them.

So I'm still relying on the in-person world that's still governed by our democratic norms of behavior, the habits of good citizenship and basic decency that we've been building since the dawn of the country.

But I hope all of us are also doing the work to build new norms, new codes of online behavior to help bring humanity and civility to the rapidly growing digital world.

There may be some role for rules and legislation, but this is mostly a matter of encoding the best traditions of civil society into our online forums.

So ask yourself, next time you're considering a Facebook post or deciding which website to visit, what are <u>you</u> doing to create and reinforce those new norms? What's <u>your</u> contribution to the civil society of the internet, here in its earliest days?

How we answer those questions will determine what kind of politics we have in the decades to come, what kind of society we'll build. The stakes are high, but so is the promise.

Our forebears created the habits of mind and action that created the strongest democracy, <u>and</u> the richest nation, in the history of the world. That tradition is ours to maintain and expand, if we can figure out how to harness it.