STATEMENT BY FORMER SENATOR TOM TAFT TO
ECU BOARD OF TRUSTEES RELATIVE TO AYCOCK NAME CHANGE
JANUARY 26, 2015

Let me congratulate those of you who have courageously raised the focused question about Governor Aycock’s past as it relates to the question of race, segregation, white supremacy, and racial inequality. These are questions that the University community should address, the Alumni community and society itself.

I hope we can seize the momentum you have initiated to advance the cause of racial justice and a more fair society.

I am not an Alumni of ECU but Duke and UNC. I was a history major at Duke and my senior paper was on Reconstruction in North Carolina and so I am blessed to probably have more insight into the dark corners of this period of our history than many. If you know my personal history of supporting the Civil Rights Movement and the African American community in North Carolina and Eastern NC and the many initiatives I sponsored in the State Senate, you know that my comments today arise from a fair-minded career and lifetime in step with many of your views.

Let me say up front that I am opposed to the renaming and respectfully ask your consideration of these points.
First, I believe deeply that one can have a different opinion about renaming without being racist, prejudiced or insensitive to the issues raised by Reconstruction and the lives and opinions of our leaders and ordinary citizens of America since our founding.

I believe we have to accept that many of our parents, grandparents and political leaders of their generations and prior generations had racial beliefs that we all find abhorrent but we cannot erase that past by taking names off of buildings and memorials nor can we ignore the issues raised by the lives of these people.

I believe we must look at the entire history of an individual such as Governor Aycock and weigh the good against the bad and by most any objective measure, the good in his life is far, far exceeded by the shadow of his racial beliefs during a portion of his life.

I have no doubt that if Governor Aycock were alive today he would believe and support the Civil Rights Movement as much as anyone in this room but like my parents and many of their generation they only came to change their views later in their adulthood, but in the case of Governor Aycock he is not alive today and that’s not the issue before us.

We have to look beyond even Governor Aycock and ask how many other leaders in the founding and flourishing of this University and this country would have to be removed or changed if we follow the standard being suggested here.
George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and other great American leaders had slaves and clearly had racial beliefs indefensible today, but do we rename the Washington Monument, the Jefferson Memorial, do we remove them from our currency?

I suspect that former Governor Terry Sanford, probably the most important white political figure in leading and creating the atmosphere for the desegregation in North Carolina, likely held beliefs in his earlier years that would be labeled as biased and intellectually repugnant but with life’s experience and times changing, look what he did for racial justice and so goes the list: Governor Jarvis, Dr. Fleming, David Whichard, Sr. and Dr. Wright for whom this building is named.

Let’s seize the moment and call on the Board of Trustees and the Administration to this University and indeed the entire Alumni Association and the Greenville Community at large to enter into a dialogue about Reconstruction in North Carolina and how it impacts our society today. Let that discussion blossom into a discussion of racial equality, identification of barriers to full citizenship and full opportunity for people of all colors.

Rather than becoming angry at Board of Trustees who interpret these matters differently than you do or I do, embrace them in a vigorous, reasoned and pointed way to ensure that this University is committed to eliminating any vestiges of prejudice or bias that holds people back and ensure that the University looks for ways to create opportunities for discussions of race in America and in Greenville and at ECU.
I would respectfully say to you that might disagree with me that if this Board of Trustees in its wisdom has a different opinion about this matter than you, don’t get mad or rude but engage them vigorously and intelligently to demonstrate that their decision is made with not only sensitivity to but a commitment to ensure that East Carolina University is a place where all of our citizens and guests from other cultures and countries can be certain that this University community is dedicated to learning, scholarship and a community that respects all people, does not tolerate racial prejudice or other inappropriate biases and demand that they be good stewards of the principles of freedom and opportunity for all.