



# Unreachable Stars: The End Game for Audacious Goals

By Phil Anthrop

I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.

—JOHN F. KENNEDY  
May 25, 1962

We choose to go to the moon in this decade, and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard.

—JOHN F. KENNEDY  
September 12, 1962

To dream the impossible dream  
To fight the unbeatable foe  
To bear with unbearable sorrow  
To run where the brave dare not go  
To right the unrightable wrong  
To love pure and chaste from afar  
To try when your arms are too weary  
To reach the unreachable star

—“The Impossible Dream”  
*Man of La Mancha*, 1972

**T**he webcast by the Elmore Foundation’s new direction was meant to impress, and it did. Not only did its new leaders announce a 90-degree turn in the organization’s vision, they set big, hair-raising 10-year goals.

“We stand at the edge of the future,” declared President and CEO Brent Peabody at a well-attended press conference, “but only if we are willing to grasp it with both hands. The Elmore

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**—An Elmore Foundation executive**

Foundation’s new direction will employ the best metrics and the most compelling partnerships to end hunger, illiteracy, and dispassion in Georgia by the year 2020.”

Elmore Foundation Chair of the Board of Trustees Karla Duster added that “surely what was possible in space is possible here on earth,” alluding to President Kennedy’s 10-year goal to send a man to the moon. “To take on the world’s

biggest challenges requires big goals,” an Elmore Foundation executive asserted. “We are in the solution business. Time and again, we have seen that a clarion call can inspire and mobilize a community, a generation, and even a species to accomplish that which they themselves had believed impossible.”

The Atlanta, Georgia-based Elmore Foundation had built on a growing practice of setting not just ambitious goals but astounding targets that eradicate, not merely ameliorate, problems. Reverend Lucious Walker commended the approach. “The current situation is unacceptable,” the Reverend said. “To set a goal of reducing homelessness, illiteracy, or hunger by 40 percent—to merely reduce the unacceptable—is essentially to say it is acceptable. That we should never do.”

When asked how the Elmore Foundation would measure its progress, Peabody responded, “That is an essential element. By measuring and reporting each year, we will get this whole state involved. There is not a single business in

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Georgia, or government agency, church, or charity that doesn't have a stake in making this happen. Each metric will lead us to what happens next."

Yet it turns out that setting the goal is the easy part, and regret its bitter fruit.

Indeed, on the other side of the 10-year goal, things can look different, as the 1985 Mennonite Church General Assembly found out. The Mennonites developed Vision '95, where 1995 was the target year for the 10-year goals that were designed, in the words of the *Gospel Herald* reporter that covered the Assembly, "to jerk the Mennonite Church out of its sluggish-growth doldrums." Despite the high hopes, for Vision '95, church membership growth remained the same, less than 1 percent a year. Like other disappointments throughout history, the participants tend to move on and don't say much about what didn't happen. "It was a good goal," remarked Juanita Martinez, the co-pastor of Iglesia Cristiana Ebenezer and a member of the general assembly executive committee. "I'm sorry we didn't reach it, but we really don't think about that anymore."

Heroic members of the try-try-try-again camp include the members of the U.S. Metric Association, founded in 1916 to end the confusing muddle of U.S. weights and measures. In its 55th year as an advocacy group for U.S. conversion to the metric system, USMA issued its 1971 manifesto: *A Metric America: A Decision Whose Time Has Come*. Finally on December 23, 1975, USMA succeeded in getting President Gerald R. Ford to sign the Metric Conversion Act of 1975, which finally gave official federal sanction for the United States to convert to using the metric system.

But sadly, while the 10-year deadline for conversion was included in the original bill for the U.S. Congress to vote on, it was somehow dropped from the bill's

final version. So no deadline was set for making the U.S. transition to metric system usage. Nevertheless, the next year, President Ford sent USMA a ceremonial pen to commemorate the signing of this metric law. Maybe it was the lack of a clear deadline that explains why the motto "Get Set for Metric" never took off in the United States, making it and the outlaw regime of Burma the only countries not to adopt the metric system.

Yet hard lessons breed caution, and the reaction to the Elmore Foundation's audacious goals was not all positive. The altruistic intentions made community leaders in Georgia reluctant to question the campaign, despite their worries

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—Joan Armstrong,

*Georgia Network for Kids*

about the ultimately discouraging results of unrealistic goals.

"The foundation's objectives are worthwhile and can be useful to rally the community, and I guess they play well in conferences, task forces, and press releases. But what happens when all these 10-year goals fail?" asked Joan Armstrong of the Georgia Network for Kids. "The complete end to hunger, illiteracy, and dispassion? What kind of message will that send to the children?"

"It is just too convenient that this 10-year time frame is two to four years longer than the average term of a governor, foundation president, board member, or religious leader, so that they'll be out of the picture before proving up," noted Armstrong. "Who will be around to give the final report? Each of the speakers at that damn press conference should have to put up a performance bond, with damages if they don't show up."

The National Center for 10-Year Goals (NC10YG) at Mammon University now tracks the trend of setting decade-long targets. NC10YG has identified 456 separate 10-year philanthropic goals established since the year 2000, with the first set now coming due.

Mammon Professor Marijo Wunderlich observed, "It is one thing when a goal is a physical action, like building a bridge, immunizing children, or even going to the moon. Now we are seeing flights of fancy and dreams of human perfectibility. I blame the publicists," Wunderlich asserted.

Community groups in Georgia have been even more critical. "A positive ideal can be constructive, I'll give you that, but overselling and overpromising is ultimately sabotage," Armstrong said. "The Elmore Foundation's self-promotion is just following in the misguided footsteps of Michael Jackson's 'We are the World' music video and the EST Hunger Project Campaign to End World Hunger just by positive thinking. Spoiling the public spirit by selling false hopes and dashing young people's dreams is as immoral as toxic assets and Ponzi schemes."

Elmore Foundation CEO Peabody said he had no problem with the criticism from some of the Atlanta-area nonprofits. "Clearly they don't need our money," he said. "Besides, as we say all the time, we're in the solution business, not the problem business."

Given the backlash, some observers foresee a retreat from big goal setting. Professor Wunderlich agreed. "Yeah, I'd give it 10 years," she predicted.

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