

Introduction

Jesse Helms's Politics of Pious Incitement

In the American South, a region where cultural conservatism and segregation coexisted with loyalty to the Democratic Party and wide support for liberal economic policies, Jesse Helms became a pivotal figure in advancing the conservative movement of the 1950s and 1960s. From the 1940s to the early 1970s his career immersed him in politics and mass media: city editor of the *Raleigh Times*, news director for WRAL radio, editor of the *Tarheel Banker*, administrative assistant to Senator Willis Smith, and starting in 1960, vice president of WRAL television. In Washington, D.C., as Smith's assistant, the young Helms developed a national vision for conservative power. He recognized that conservative southern Democrats had more in common with western and midwestern Republicans—like Richard Nixon, Robert Taft, and Joseph R. McCarthy—than with liberal Democrats. A national conservative party, however, would require southern realignment. In 1953 Helms left Washington for a private-sector job promoting free enterprise. His new position afforded him a chance to advocate realignment.

Although his critics have often painted Helms as a fringe figure, such depictions represent wishful thinking rather than a serious appraisal of his influence. True, Helms—a polished, well-connected extremist in a banker's suit—expressed views associated with the fringe during the postwar decades. But Helms helped conservatives win a majority, first in North Carolina and then nationally. He believed the liberal consensus was shallow, mainly an elite phenomenon. The problem was how, with a moderate to liberal media, the right could reach these voters. He found solutions. By the 1970s, no one could doubt Helms's centrality to the conservative movement. He signed a fund-raising letter for the Moral

Majority, and the dollars streamed in. His National Congressional Club supplied Ronald Reagan with money and ideas during his 1976 and 1980 campaigns. In his autobiography, Bill Clinton charged that Helms lay behind Kenneth Starr's appointment as a special prosecutor to investigate Clinton's activities.¹

Even before his election to the U.S. Senate, then, Helms had become a significant figure in American political history. There were two reasons for this. First, he forged a new form of southern conservatism that made it possible for movement conservatives, grounded in the South and the Republican Party, to gain power. He rooted conservatism in private enterprise as the vanguard of a modern, progressive society—one that could simultaneously provide prosperity and maintain traditional values. Avoiding discussions of “race purity” yet never criticizing racists, Helms made white supremacy “safe” for conservative campaigning. His commentaries united conservatives: working class with country club, Democrats with Republicans, small-government advocates and do-anything-to-win anti-communists with segregationists and conservative Christians.

Second, Helms pioneered the attack on the “liberal media” and, most important, the building of conservative media. While he was vice president of WRAL-TV in Raleigh, Helms's commentaries and news department undermined Democrats, advanced conservatism, and challenged the forces advocating change. His commentaries made him something new—a conservative TV personality—and represented the culmination of a career as a media insider. Helms intended to use WRAL's influence to elect conservatives. His news department and commentaries anticipated Fox News' barely disguised conservative advocacy. Risking WRAL's broadcast license, he defied the Federal Communication Commission's Fairness Doctrine for the conservative movement. His commentaries and news department molded the 1960s anti-liberal backlash in North Carolina into a powerful voter coalition supporting conservative Republicans.

A Movement Conservative

Since Reagan's victories in the 1980s, historians have investigated the rise of the New Right. They found its origins in the conservative movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the leadership of William F. Buckley Jr. and Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona. With the foundation of *National Review* in 1955, Buckley built a conservative alternative to mainstream

media and a movement culture. In his books, magazine, and media appearances he attacked liberal elites in politics, academia, and the media while espousing a populist religious traditionalism. Buckley's magazine brought together disparate conservative elements: traditionalist Catholics and Protestants, libertarian advocates of private enterprise and small government, and anticommunists demanding victory over communism abroad and conformity at home. He used his magazine to distance the movement from the most objectionable elements of the right, most notably the John Birch Society (JBS) and southern segregationists. But Buckley was measured in his criticism, because conservatives needed the votes and energy of southern whites and JBS members. His criticism of the JBS centered on Robert Welch. And he defended the South's segregation with limited-government ideology.²

Goldwater was conservatives' "knight on a white horse" saving them and the Republican Party from Eisenhower's modern Republicanism. In his landslide loss to Lyndon Johnson, Goldwater captured the Republican Party for movement conservatives. Perhaps even more vital, he convinced millions of voters—segregationists, religious traditionalists, and fervent anticommunists—that they were conservatives and the GOP their party. The most significant of the voters newly willing to vote Republican were southern whites. Goldwater, and later Reagan, gave the movement a western image of rugged individualism, but it was the swing in the white southern vote that really made conservatism viable. The white South's realignment was not merely racial backlash. Affluent white suburbs in the South resembled Republican enclaves in other regions. But without backlash and Republican willingness to exploit it, realignment would not have happened.³

With their focus on presidential elections rather than the conservative movement, Dan T. Carter and Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall posited a top-down model, with presidential candidates Richard Nixon and Alabama governor George C. Wallace leading the way. In Carter's view, Wallace's national campaigns exported Deep South politics to the rest of the country: Nixon's southern strategy simply stole the governor's fire.⁴ In this narrative, the Wallace and Nixon campaigns molded a cross-class white constituency for conservatism that depended on racial anxiety, hostility to cultural elites, anticommunism, and rejection of big government. This meant not only a new conservatism but also a southernization of American public life.

Matthew D. Lassiter and Kevin M. Kruse have challenged this top-down, Deep South version of southernization and examined the grassroots constituency for conservatism in the Sun Belt South. Lassiter and Kruse complicate southern class relationships, demonstrating that, rather than unifying whites, integration debates exacerbated class conflict. The white working class resented the safely segregated middle-class suburbs. The key actors in Lassiter's and Kruse's narratives are working- and middle-class white southerners who organized grassroots resistance to bus-ing and neighborhood integration in rapidly growing Sun Belt cities such as Charlotte and Atlanta. Although opposition to desegregation began with massive resistance and explicit racism, these activists advocated an ideal of color-blind individualism that obscured their defense of racial and class discrimination. In this bottom-up model, white flight gave birth to modern conservatism: private schools, the tax revolt, and the rejection not only of big government but also of public space. The basis of southernization and the shift of the nation's politics rightward was not a simple model of racial backlash but rather a convergence in the interests of residentially segregated suburbs in all regions.⁵

More recently, Joseph Crespino and David Farber have pushed the history of modern conservatism back before the Goldwater campaign and before the *National Review*. Farber begins his history with Senator Robert Taft's challenge to Roosevelt's New Deal. Taft defended business against New Deal efforts to regulate capitalism and use federal power to ensure the security of the American people. In his 1938 Senate campaign, Taft was the first American politician to use the term "conservative" to describe his views. He championed individual economic liberty over federal regulation and claimed moral superiority for the conservative cause. Crespino establishes the importance of Strom Thurmond's 1948 Dixiecrat challenge to President Truman for modern conservatism. Thurmond, he shows, even in 1948 was simultaneously "one of the last Jim Crow demagogues" and "one of the first Sunbelt conservatives." Anticipating the future of conservative campaigning, he mixed racial politics with anticommunism and advocated pro-business, anti-labor policies. Once elected to the Senate, Thurmond supported Republican president Dwight Eisenhower more than did any other Democrat and second among all senators. In 1964 Thurmond switched parties to support Republican nominee Goldwater, and in 1968 his endorsement helped Nixon win southern votes.