

**Jesse Helms, Barry Goldwater, and the Dynamic of Modern Conservatism**  
**William A. Link, University of Florida**

**Goldwater at 100 Conference: His Politics, Ideology, and Legacy**  
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This paper explores the relationship between two of the leading ideologues of modern conservatism, Jesse Helms and Barry Goldwater. Helms regarded Goldwater as the father of a popular movement that emerged and defined itself during and especially after Goldwater's presidential run in 1964. But even before then, Helms admired Goldwater from afar. Although Helms was a nominal Democrat in 1960, he wrote Goldwater that he shared the "same views" as the Arizona senator. Helms had "not once voted for a liberal or socialistic proposition, and I don't intend to." He wondered "how long a fellow can last in this era of worship of big government." Still he believed that "conservatism is potentially more popular than we realize!"<sup>1</sup>

Jesse Helms harbored political ambitions, but his only elective office prior to 1972 was two terms in the Raleigh City Council in the late 1950s. He had experienced a political awakening during the late 1940s, when he became a vocal opponent of federal power and a staunch anti-communist. Working as a news broadcaster in the late 1940s for WRAL radio in Raleigh, North Carolina, Helms participated in Willis Smith's successful challenge of southern liberal Frank Porter Graham in the Democratic primary for the U.S. Senate in 1950. That sharply polarized campaign, which featured race and anti-communism as dominant issues, became a political watershed for Helms. For most of the 1950s and 1960s, Helms helped to construct a following of North Carolina conservatives by his staunch opposition to the civil rights movement, the expanded, post-New Deal federal government, and student unrest and the counterculture of the 1960s. Helms's forum was not public office but the airwaves, and, broadcasting TV editorials throughout the 1960s, he became a highly effective conservative ideologue. Urged by one North Carolina conservative to become "our Goldwater,"<sup>2</sup> Helms converted to the Republican party in 1970 and two years later was elected U.S. Senator in the Nixon landslide of that year.

Helms and Goldwater converged most clearly on issues of political economy and by their almost religious dedication to anticommunism. But over time, what is most apparent is how Helms and Goldwater diverged, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. Their divergence, I argue, represents a larger, dynamic tension within modern conservatism. Helms was not only anti-statist and anticommunist, he was also loudly opposed to federal intervention in civil rights, an opponent of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, and an early supporter of the Religious Right. In his waning years, Goldwater famously developed opposition opinions and became a critic of the New Right.

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<sup>1</sup> JH to Barry Goldwater, October 19, 1960, Jesse Helms Papers, Jesse Helms Center, Wingate, N.C.

<sup>2</sup> Dot Crawford to JH, May 6, 1961; JH to Crawford, May 10, 1961, Helms Papers.