Time Is an Elusive Companion:

Jesse Helms, Barry Goldwater, and the Dynamic of Modern Conservatism

Goldwater at 100 Conference

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"There wouldn't even be a conservative movement," Helms liked to say, "if it hadn't been for Barry Goldwater."[1] Had it not been for Goldwater's "terrific fight" for the conservative cause, he wrote, "I'd be in Raleigh running a television company." Without Goldwater, said Helms, "it never would have crossed my mind to run for the Senate."[2] In fact, there were significant ideological differences dividing Jesse Helms and Barry Goldwater. In policy, and especially in domestic policy, they sometimes diverged. Although Helms remained an admirer of Goldwater, their differences by the early 1980s help to illustrate the tensions that lay present in the phenomenon of modern conservatism. For although Goldwater provided a defining moment in 1964, by the time that the conservative ascendancy took hold—from the late 1970s to the turn of the twentieth-first century—the American Right had re-imagined itself.

In the 1970s, Americans witnessed an important political transformation—what historians describe as a Rightward Turn in national life. In 1976, Ronald Reagan almost captured the Republican nomination for the White House, and, in 1980, when he was swept to office, the triumph of modern conservatism appeared complete. Goldwater was widely feted as "Mr. Conservative" during the triumphal

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[1] Jesse Helms to Barry M. Goldwater, June 10, 1975, Personal and Political Papers of Senator Barry M. Goldwater, Series I, Personal Alpha Files, Box 8, Folder 12; hereinafter cited as BMG.

[2] JH to BMG, December 21, 1979, BMG.

years of the Reagan Revolution, and he became what the *New York Times* in early 1981 called an "old-school elder statesman" of the conservative cause.[3]

Barry Goldwater served as an icon for Jesse Helms and other movement conservatives; his quixotic 1964 presidential campaign, seemingly run on principles rather than politics, defined the ideological purity of the American Right.[4] Goldwater's anticommunism, his unstinting opposition to a big federal government, and his dedication to individual freedom provided an umbrella beneath which different elements of modern conservatism could reside. In the 1960s, when Helms worked in North Carolina as a television broadcaster and editorialist, he often used Goldwater to represent a wider conservative coalition. Helms's admiration for Goldwater and what he stood for thus makes their relationship all the more illuminating in explaining the complicated dynamics of modern conservatism.

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[3] Peter Ross Range, "Thunder from the Right," *New York Times Magazine*, February 8, 1981. The literature on modern conservatism is rapidly growing. See Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Donald Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[4] On the 1964 campaign, see Robert Alan Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), chs. 7-9; Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

Growing up in the small North Carolina town of Monroe during the 1920s and 1930s, Helms spent two years in college, and then dove into a career as a newspaper journalist, radio announcer, and, beginning in 1960, full-time TV conservative. Between November 1960 and February 1972, Helms broadcast more than 2,700 television editorials. These Viewpoint editorials provided Helms the chance to shape a political message that was rooted in opposition to the civil rights movement, hostility to liberal elites and student protesters, and suspicion of changes accompanying the 1960s counterculture.

Even before Goldwater's presidential run, Helms admired the Arizona senator from afar. Helms enthusiastically endorsed Goldwater's brand of conservatism, as espoused in his 1960 manifesto, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, and praised his ideas on television broadcasts. A nominal Democrat who never voted for a Democratic presidential candidate, Helms became a dedicated conservative. He believed that Goldwater represented a new wave of ideological change. Conservatism, Helms predicted in 1960, was "potentially more popular than we realize."[5] Goldwater's defense of freedom, according to Helms, was essential. Freedom was like a "handful of sand," Helms informed viewers on December 7, 1960, and the "moment you relax any of your fingers, it starts slipping away from you." Helms, like Goldwater, considered himself a man who placed principle above party politics. Goldwater might never rise to party leadership, he explained, but "he strikes

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[5] JH to Barry Goldwater, October 19, 1960, Jesse Helms Papers, Jesse Helms Center, Wingate, N.C; hereinafter cited as JH. See also BMG to JH, December 9, 1960, ibid.

us as a man who couldn't care less," both "doing and saying what he thinks is right." Goldwater was a person, Helms said in December 1961, who spoke "without timidity and without hesitation" and who expressed the "very same things that a great many other Americans, both Democrats and Republicans, have been thinking for a great while but not saying because they feared the political consequences." His liberal critics might jeer at him, but his consistent application of principle would eventually bear fruit. "Sooner or later," Helms said, "the truths which he has borrowed from Jefferson, Jackson, Franklin and others will set us free."[6]

Helms's views about Goldwater were self-referential: he saw himself as similarly ideological, similarly standing above the corruption of political compromise. And, like Goldwater, he believed that his conservatism represented the views of most Americans, whose information and understanding of public life had been filtered through a liberal media. In 1962, Helms noted how television reporters casually referred to Goldwater as "rightwing" and "extremist." The media's marginalization of Goldwater—and implicitly Helms's marginalization—illustrated the "hazards of presuming to speak out in opposition to the so-called 'liberal' trend in America." This provided an example of "a matter of words, and the effective use of them by the political liberals of our society." "What Peter says about Paul," Helms chided, "tells more about Peter than it does about Paul."[7]

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[6] VP # 12, December 7, 1960; VP # 262, December 12, 1961. Goldwater responded that he appreciated "the editorializing that your station is now doing [in] getting across to the people the importance of the conservative philosophy." Goldwater to Helms, December 9, 1960, JH.

[7] VP # 294, January 30, 1962.

When Goldwater ran for president as the Republican nominee in 1964, Helms realized that his candidacy might pave the way for a larger conservative revolution. Criticizing the liberal media for distorting Goldwater's message, Helms asserted that Goldwater, after his victory in the June 1964 California primary, represented "the last stand of conservatism in the United States." He was a polarizing figure, "an attractive figure to some, and the opposite to others," but his campaign was premised on offering genuine choice and upsetting the post-1945 political consensus that was stifling true political dialogue." When all was said and done, this was "what the country has been needing for some time." Although it was likely that voters would overwhelmingly choose "more of the same," Jesse believed that "freedom's best hope of survival lies in the people's having a clear-cut choice."[8] In July 1964, he noted that Goldwater would have "served his country well for, between now and November, all Americans will be exposed to an inescapable study of the nation's principles and fundamentals."[9] Goldwater was depicted in the press as a "trigger-happy warmonger, as a cruel man who would cast his nation into starvation and despair; as, in short, a monster," he complained in September. It was hardly necessary to assert that such an image was "monstrously false."[10]

Helms was not discouraged by Lyndon Johnson's landslide victory in the presidential election of 1964. Goldwater's defeat reflected a lack of support among those lacking "the courage to try to offset the tempting and beguiling lures that

[8] VP # 877, June 10, 1964.

[9] VP # 895, July 20, 1964.

[10] VP # 941, September 22, 1964.

captivate the dreams of massive numbers of voters." Goldwater's message of "self-reliance and personal responsibility" was not easy to communicate to unresponsive voters. But Goldwater also ran into an "emotional phalanx" when he explained that government was unable to provide anything "that it has not first taken from the people, or borrowed from future generations." When Goldwater distinguished between "the needy and the lazy," he was labeled as heartless. "When he called for a strengthening of the original concept of Social Security," Helms said, "he was charged with proposing to destroy it. For advocating for his nation a posture of strength in the world, he was labeled a warmonger." Johnson, in contrast, ran a basically dishonest campaign in which he promised "continued peace and security, without ever quite revealing the nature of the peace we now have, nor the kind of security for which we might hope." What Goldwater endured in 1964, Helms concluded three years later, "does not differ, except perhaps in degree, from what all conservatives—in office and out—have learned to expect as their lot."[11]

After election to the Senate in 1972, Helms looked to Goldwater as a prominent member of the small conservative Republican element in Congress. "It means a very great deal to me to be able to serve in the Senate with you," Helms wrote early in his first term, in November 1973. A close friend of Jesse's commented to Goldwater that he never saw the North Carolina senator "without your name coming up in the conversation," adding that he considered it a "high honor to be able

[11] VP # 972 and # 1542, November 4, 1964, February 14, 1967. Goldwater seemed to have appreciated the attention. See Goldwater to Helms, August 5, 1966, JH.

to serve in the Senate with you."[12] But Helms's admiring comments masked substantive differences. During Jesse's early years in the Senate, rather than Goldwater, he looked to fellow southern senators such as Strom Thurmond, Harry F. Byrd, and James Allen for tutelage, instruction, and support. Helms quickly became known for his ability to master the Senate rules and to publicize conservative causes by tying up debate and deliberation. Skillfully exploiting the amendment process and filibuster to his advantage, in the 1970s Helms—who was emerging as a leading member of movement conservatives—rarely won such battles. "We lost," as Helms described the outcome of one such fight, "but the odds were such that it would have been miraculous if we had won." [13]

Unlike many areas of domestic policy, Helms and Goldwater agreed on foreign policy issues: both strongly opposed détente and believed the military should combat Soviet expansionism. Goldwater was, perhaps, a more uncompromising anticommunist than Helms—which is saying something. As staunch anticommunists, Helms and Goldwater agreed in their support of white minority regimes in Africa, disapproval of better relations with "Red" China, and opposition to ratification of the Panama Canal treaties in 1978. When Jesse sponsored a resolution making Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn an honorary US citizen in 1974, Goldwater refused to support it. "I just can't bring

[12] JH to BMG, November 21, 1973; Thomas F. Ellis to BMG, November 28, 1973, BMG.

[13] JH to BMG, February 4, 1974, BMG.

myself to giving honorary citizens to anyone from that country," he wrote, though Solzhenitsyn "would come as close to getting it as anyone I have ever known."[14]

Goldwater and Helms were personally cordial; despite his hard-nosed public image, Helms was one of the better-liked members of the Senate. When Helms experienced a stiff challenge from incumbent North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt for his Senate seat in 1984, Goldwater visited the state and campaigned for him.[15] Throughout their years in the Senate, the two men enjoy good relations, though it cannot be said that they were personally close. Nor were the two men true political allies. Goldwater agreed with Helms that one of his favorite tactics—forcing votes on hopeless causes in order to put his opponents on record—was sometimes beneficial. There were, Goldwater wrote Helms in May 1976, "some who talk one way at home, and vote another way here."[16] But obstructionism was usually not Goldwater's style, despite his willingness to lend Helms occasional assistance. Goldwater did not participate in the conservative mobilization that Jesse led during the 1970s and 1980s. Goldwater did not approve of the aggressive tactics that Helms and his allies so often employed. In 1975, when Helms's political organization first began direct-mail fundraising, Goldwater refused to permit his name to be used. His name, he wrote, had been "used so much over the last few

[14] BMG to JH, April 15, 1974, BMG.

[15] JH to BMG, July 16, 1984, BMG.

[16] BMG to JH, May 12, 1976, BMG.

years that I am afraid it won't have any meaning and I don't want to see it go down any further."[17]

The divergence between Goldwater and Helms, over time, grew most apparent on issues of race and culture, issues that became defining for modern conservatism as it evolved after the 1960s. Remarkably, Helms's views about the federalization of civil rights remained unchanged throughout his life. He was personally offended by any suggestion that he was racist, and was convinced that he had many black friends and had their best interests in mind. He considered any insinuations about his racial attitudes profoundly insulting, any suggestions of hostility toward black people offensive. When interviewers pressed too hard about his racial attitudes, he bristled. Once, during a long biographical interview with North Carolina public television that aired in several taped segments, he stormed off the set when the interviewer pressed too hard about his positions on civil rights. Helms was, however, tone deaf about matters of race. He unquestionably shared the prejudices common to southern whites of his time, and, like many small-town whites, ignored the basic injustice of Jim Crow and mounting black discontent with it.[18] The conclusion of the *Raleigh News and Observer* in 1972 that Helms was "the most notable antagonist of Negro rights in the last 10 years in North Carolina" could easily define the rest of his career.[19]

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[17] Charlie Black to JH, March 6, 1975; BMG to JH, March 10, 1975, BMG.

[18] Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, pp. 4-5, 83.

[19] Quoted in "Jesse Helms and 'the Whispers,'" editorial, *Charlotte Observer*, August 13, 1972.

When the Supreme Court ordered the end of segregated public schools in 1954, Helms became a vocal opponent.[20] After Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus blocked court-ordered integration and President Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard and dispatched paratroopers to provide for the integration of Central High School in Little Rock in September 1957, Helms was appalled. Federal intervention in the South, he wrote, was "exactly in tune" with Karl Marx's predictions: government-required integration amounted to socialism. "The cackles you hear," Jesse wrote tellingly in the *Tarheel Banker* editorial, had "a Russian accent."[21]

Helms saw political potential in framing an ideological message that avoided overt racial appeals but appealed to white fears. Crude racial appeals, he advised in December 1957, remained ineffective with those possessing a "sincere misunderstanding of the South's problem"—suburban whites who mostly preferred issues of race to be coded.[22] In order to reach white audiences, Helms argued for the more skillful use of media. Whites should communicate more effectively, he advised, to a national conservative constituency who, armed with the truth, would oppose

[20] "There Is Another Way," *Tarheel Banker*, XXXIV no. 3 (September 1955): 24. See also Bryan Hardin Thrift, "Jesse Helms, the New Right, and American Freedom" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 2005), pp. 42-44, and "Jesse Helms's Politics of Pious Incitement: Race, Conservatism, and Southern Realignment in the 1950s," *Journal of Southern History* LXXXIV (November 2008): 887-926.

[21] "We Aren't Solving Anything," *Tarheel Banker*, XXXVI no. 5 (November 1957): 32.

[22] JH to Mrs. E. H. Whinham, December 6, 1957, JH to Frank J. Mackey, December 30, 1957, JH.

governmental intrusion and meddling in southern affairs.[23] In order to overcome northern white "misunderstanding," Helms emphasized anticommunism and opposition to federal intervention; he also suggested that racial mores would change only through slow, voluntary action by whites and self-help by blacks, who, he claimed, were not yet ready for leadership.[24] Federal intervention in civil rights meant socialism, Helms argued, and greater and greater governmental encroachment. He worried less about integration, he wrote in December 1958, than about "the destruction of the fundamentals that made this government unique in all history."[25]

Increasingly, Helms crafted a conservative message that melded racial anxieties with anti-government sentiment. Unreconciled to federal intervention in the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts of 1964-65, he opposed the revolution in civil rights that occurred as a result of federal intervention. Many of his WRAL Viewpoint editorials dealt with how social deterioration and decline of the 1960s had resulted from the civil rights revolution. Detesting the black civil rights leadership, Helms viewed direct-action protest as an illegal flouting of the law that had encouraged crime and social order. Helms's Viewpoint editorials suggested a link between

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[23] JH, excerpt from addresses to Western North Carolina Conference, National Association of Bank Auditors and Comptrollers, November 21, 1957, JH; "Banker Asks Million for 'Truth Campaign,'" *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, November 22, 1957; "Bank Official Suggests 'Truth Drive' by South," unidentified clipping in JH; JH to Wriston A. Helms, November 26, 1957, JH.

[24] Jesse Helms to Mrs. Holmes Van Mater, March 30, 1956, JH.

[25] JH to Thomas D. Collins, December 17, 1958, JH. See also JH to Frank J. Mackey, December 30, 1957, JH.

crime and white anxieties about an urban black population. Civil rights protest, he believed, had spun out of control in the black urban uprisings that erupted for four summers after 1964. Urban violence seemed to confirm Helms's general assertions about the civil rights movement's disrespect for law and order and its abdication of "responsible" racial leadership. Too many African American leaders wanted "open and violent conflict with their white neighbors," he told viewers in April 1964.[26] Black people deserved a "right to pursue progress, and to strive for opportunity," but their leaders wrongly encouraged them to "misbehave and violate the law in demanding what they vaguely call 'freedom.'"[27]

Helms in the 1960s made an important leap in the repackaging of the race issue to a national audience. The civil rights revolution's main legacy, he suggested, was social disorder. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil disobedience campaign had created a climate that encouraged "riots and anarchy in the streets in recent years." King, Helms charged, was joined by white liberals, a "gaggle of preachers and professors" who joined in flouting the law, and these liberals had created a "condition in which the vicious and the irresponsible have gone to war with all society."[28] In Helms's world, legal and social order were disintegrating. The nation raced toward anarchy, he warned in June 1964: in their disrespect for the law, civil rights protesters enjoyed the tacit support of federal authorities.[29] When they took

[26] VP # 833, April 9, 1964.

[27] VP # 829, April 3, 1964.

[28] VP # 1674, August 30, 1967.

[29] VP # 883, June 18, 1964.

the law into their own hands, suddenly legal wrongs became civil rights, and the law was violated "deliberately and repeatedly." Helms sensed an atmospheric transformation that was gripping white America in the 1960s, and he took full advantage of mounting white frustration and anxiety with the civil rights revolution.[30]

When he joined the Senate in 1972, Helms remained an inveterate opponent of the legacy of the civil rights revolution. Throughout the 1970s, Helms remained the Senate's strongest opponent of federally mandated school busing, and, based on the widespread unpopularity of busing, he succeeded in turning that issue into a cause with national appeal. He fought a lonely and largely futile battle to block the extension and expansion of the Voting Rights Act in 1982. But nothing better illustrates his continuing hostility to the civil rights legacy than his filibuster of the bill, in October 1983, to make Martin Luther King, Jr's birthday a national holiday. Although there is no evidence of "subversion" on King's part—despite extensive efforts by J. Edgar Hoover to prove it—Helms revived the old connection between anticommunism and hostility to the civil rights movement. King's views, Helms told fellow senators on October 3, 1983, were "those of a radical political minority that had little to do with racial minorities." King took few measures to dissociate himself from the "most extreme political elements in the United States," and he exhibited an "action-oriented Marxism" that was "not compatible with the concepts of this

[30] VP # 801, February 25, 1964.

country." These charges were ludicrous, and they persuaded few senators, but they laid out Helms's interpretation of the legacy of the civil rights movement.[31]

There were importance between Helms and Goldwater about race, civil rights, and federal intervention. Where Helms became a conservative ideologue out of the taut environment of the highly racialized political world of North Carolina, Goldwater had no such political roots, no such context. His conservatism was primarily anticommunist and antistatist, and his core belief was in the sanctity of individual freedom. While Helms was busy organizing opposition to the Brown decisions in North Carolina, in the 1950s Goldwater endorsed voting rights for African Americans, even criticizing the Kennedy administration in the 1960s for lax federal enforcement. Goldwater also favored a constitutional amendment banning the poll tax. Still, it is undeniable that Goldwater benefited politically from white reaction to the civil rights revolution. In *The Conscience of a A Conservative*, Goldwater opposed federalized school desegregation and asserted that the matter should remain an issue of state jurisdiction.[32] He vocally led Senate opposition to the Civil Rights Act in June 1964, and during the campaign he backtracked from earlier principled support for black voting rights. Without question, his campaign

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[31]*CR*, October 3, 1983, floor speeches, JH; Helen Dewar, "Helms Stalls King's Day In Senate," *Washington Post*, October 4, 1983; Paul Houston, "Helms Launches Filibuster against Holiday for King," *Greensboro Record*, October 4, 1983; Dave Doubrava, "Helms Moves to Head Off Vote on Bill Creating King Holiday," *Washington Times*, October 4, 1983; Steven V. Roberts, "King Holiday Bill Faces a Filibuster," *New York Times*, October 4, 1983.

[32] Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater*, p. 140.

exploited white backlash during the presidential election of 1964; all of the states he carried, aside from Arizona, were Deep South. Goldwater walked what one scholar calls a "tightrope" between personal abhorence of discrimination and a political need for southern votes.[33] Like most other opponents of the Civil Rights Act, he subsequently became reconciled to its necessity and, unlike Helms, accepted federal civil rights protections. When Helms opposed the extension of the Voting Rights Act in 1982, Goldwater remained uninvolved. Nor did he support Helms's filibuster of the King holiday, though in actual fact very few senators supported Jesse's efforts.

As a TV editorialist, Helms attacked the student revolt and the 1960s counterculture as evidence of a wider moral decline. Goldwater often reached the same conclusion, yet he recoiled at religious conservatives's politicization. In contrast, Helms sponsored and championed the mobilization of Christian evangelicals in the 1970s. The cultural issues of the 1970s drew from an expanded reaction against the main features of the 1960s—youth rebellion, sexual permissiveness, and expanded rights for women. Helms aimed his fire on abortion and school prayer and, later during the 1980s, sexuality. A newly mobilized, well-organized, and highly politicized movement of conservative evangelicals provided additional energy and leadership. Some of these elements were present in Goldwater's presidential campaign of 1964, still more in Reagan's unsuccessful

[33] Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New York: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 66.

presidential campaign of 1976, but they expanded and solidified during the late 1970s and 1980s.

Raised in a small-town culture that imbued him with a Southern Baptist ethos, Helms never wavered from religious fundamentalism. With his support and participation, Jerry Falwell, an evangelist from Lynchburg, Virginia, organized the Moral Majority in the spring of 1979. In North Carolina and nationally, Helms helped to incorporate the Christian Right into the conservative mainstream. Organizations such as the Churches of Life and Liberty and the North Carolina chapter of the Moral Majority used the resources of Jesse's political organization, the North Carolina Congressional Club, to organize and to establish themselves as viable entities. By the 1980s, Helms had become Christian evangelicals' advocate in the Senate.[34]

Among the most important issues arousing evangelicals during the 1970s were abortion and school prayer. In both instances, the Supreme Court altered the status quo by prohibiting the states' requirement of prayer in public schools (in 1962) and their criminalization of abortion (in 1973). For conservatives, the federal courts' intervention on school prayer and abortion indicated moral decay. Helms presented a simplistic view of social change that evangelicals embraced: secularization had diminished the moral fiber of the country. The elimination of prayer marked the dominance of a "totally secularist philosophy" in public schools, Helms wrote in his autobiographical *Where Free Men Shall Stand*, which had led to

[34] A. L. May, "Fundamentalists' Effect on Politics Questioned," *Raleigh News and Observer*, August 31, 1980.

permissiveness, the drug culture, pornography, and crime. The school prayer ban meant "freedom *from* religion."[35] He became the Senate's leading advocate of restoring prayer to the schools, and, though unsuccessful, he attracted attention to his cause—and made school prayer high in the conservative agenda.

Helms also became the Senate's leading opponent of legal abortion. Abortion, he said, could never be a "moral way to solve a problem of immorality—or, for that matter, a population problem," and it was "a few steps away from the reasoning that Hitler used to exterminate people."[36] In the September 1975 issue of *Human Events*, Jesse declared that it was "terribly wrong . . . to kill these children in order to serve the convenience of those who may not want them around." Abortion, Helms thought, was "murder—and no other face can be put upon it."[37] Only five months after the Supreme Court issued its decision, in June 1973, Helms proposed a right-to-life, anti-abortion constitutional amendment. Although the amendment made little progress, as with school prayer, Helms sought to force his fellow senators to put themselves on record.[38]

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[35] *Where Free Men Shall Stand,* p. 108.

[36] JH to H. Fleming Fuller, January 19, 1974, JH. Helms, in 1964, told a correspondent that he favored criminal penalties for the parents of children born out of wedlock. "No one, in my judgment, has the 'right' or the 'freedom' to bring children into the world as a discard, as an unwanted creature, and as a burden on society." JH to George Stevens III, August 12, 1964, ibid.

[37] Jesse Helms, "Abortion a Sign of Moral Decay," *Human Events*, September 13, 1975.

[38] "Senate Kills Move to Ban Abortions," *Washington Star*, April 29, 1976; Paul Scott, "Senate Abortion Showdown," *Independent American*, April 14, 1976; speech to the March for Life meeting,

Joining with the Christian Right, Helms opposed the same cluster of values which they found outrageous. In early 1977, when Dade County, Florida, which included Miami, enacted a local ordinance prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, a popular movement began. Former Miss America Anita Bryant formed a grassroots organization, Save Our Children, Inc., in a successful effort to repeal the law. Bryant's campaign became the first manifestation of an anti-gay movement attracting support from around the country. Helms endorsed Bryant's campaign in March 1977 and described her as a "fine and decent lady, a dedicated Christian, who had dared to speak out."[39] In June 1977, when Bryant's movement succeeded in repealing the ordinance by a two-to-one margin, Helms wanted to expand nationally Bryant's anti-gay-rights movement. Meeting with Bryant in Washington, Helms helped to discuss a national strategy to defeat other local anti-discrimination ordinances. He also suggested that he might seek an anti-homosexual-rights bill in Congress. Consistently opposed to gay rights in all forms, Helms established an unequivocal record about homosexuality in the 1970s.[40]

Opposition to feminism became another issue binding the Religious Right to the conservative cause. "We must reverse the trend," Jesse declared, "that says that women must be liberated from the dignity of motherhood and from femininity of

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Washington, January 22, 1975, JH. See also Helms on abortion in *CR*, June 29, October 1, December 5, 1973, January 17, March 3, 1975, March 15, April 28, June 28, 1976, in abortion notebook, JH.

[39] Jesse Helms, "Jesse Helms Reports," *Monroe Enquirer-Journal*, March 16, 1977.

[40] "Bryant Vows Battle Will Widen on Gays," *Raleigh News and Observer*, June 9, 1977.

her natural development."[41] In 1972, Congress approved the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and the measure was submitted to the states. But after twenty-two states quickly ratified, an anti-ERA movement emerged, and in 1977 Indiana became the thirty-fifth—and last—state to ratify. As an opponent of manifestations of feminism, not surprisingly Helms opposed the ERA and became allied with Phyllis Schlafly, perhaps the best known anti-feminist of the 1970s. Both opposed Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972, which equalized gender differences in intercollegiate athletics, and in 1975 Jesse introduced the Equal Educational Opportunity Amendments Bill of 1975, which proposed to reverse Title IX.[42] Anti-ERA activists feared that the amendment would transform the family and women's role in it; 1970s feminism aroused widespread anxieties.

Helms's emphasis on cultural issues became even more pronounced after Goldwater left the Senate in 1987. Jesse was the gay rights movement's most determined opponent in the Senate. Outspoken in his views, he energized anti-gay political sentiment, while he became a hated political symbol to gay political organizers. In some respects, Helms's positions on gay rights resembled his views

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[41] Paul Clancy, "Helms Would Create Conservative Party," *Charlotte Observer*, May 16, 1974.

[42] Speech, *CR*, October 1, 1974, JH; Marty Gunther, "Women Will Be the Real Losers if Our Gov't. Continues to Give in to Libbers," *The National Tattler*, October 26, 1975; Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 244-48. For background, see Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

on civil rights for blacks: in both instances, he condemned special treatment for a political minority. But in other respects his treatment of gay people went well beyond his posture toward African Americans. He instinctively recoiled at the very notion of civil rights for gay people, he told an interviewer in February 2000, and he objected primarily to any efforts to legitimize homosexual lifestyles. Like many people of his generation, he did not object to closeted gay people; he had "no problem" with their private behavior, but he objected to homosexuals "parading around" and demanding that they be regarded as "normal." Why, he asked, did gays "feel compelled to announce that they are gay?"

Helms also opposed AIDS education that legitimized homosexuality. AIDS, he suggested, was primarily a disease of homosexuals, whose behavior had hastened the epidemic. Providing special treatment for gay people, as one aide put it, was "fundamentally unfair." Public-health measures focusing on safe sex were less effective than attempts to limit or eliminate homosexual behavior. The truth, he declared, was that "sodomy, adultery, and fornication are not now, nor have they ever been, safe." Current AIDS education efforts, which focused on safe sex, revealed that public-health officials had "their heads in the sand." AIDS threatened the majority of the heterosexual population; strict public-health measures should isolate the homosexual minority and protect the heterosexual population. Despite public discussion of the disease, Helms said in a Senate speech in June 1987, there had been few steps to "protect from this dreaded disease those who do not now have it"; the "real discrimination" was that the law left the uninfected unprotected. AIDS had become the first "politically protected" disease in history, and "powerful

homosexual rights groups" had silenced the opposition. Gay-rights groups protested "any public initiatives to protect the general public beyond research and education" because they believed that public welfare was less important "to their civil rights to engage in unnatural and immoral sexual behavior."[43] Into the 1990s, Helms continued to resist any concessions on gay rights. He had "no respect for homosexuals—for perverts," he told the *Charlotte Observer* in 1992, adding that if that statement was considered shocking, it remained "exactly the way I feel about it."[44]

About these cultural wars Goldwater and Helms diverged most starkly. In a curious irony, Helms's campaign for cultural purity abandoned conservatives' historical antipathy to government and individual liberty: in all of these areas, government would assert a supervisory, regulatory role. In this sense, Goldwater was more consistent. After his retirement from the Senate in 1987, Goldwater's disaffection with the new conservatism grew. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Goldwater became a supporter of gay rights. In June 1992, he endorsed a civil-rights ordinance under consideration by the Phoenix city council, and in 1993, he supported homosexuals serving in the armed forces. "You don't have to be 'straight' to fight and die for your country. You just need to shoot straight," he declared in a

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[43]Willkie interview, April 21, 2006; *CR*, June 10, 1987; Bill Krueger, "Helms Submits Bill for Broader AIDS Testing," *Raleigh News and Observer*, June 11, 1987.

[44] John Monk, "Helms Might Fight Clinton on Allowing Gays in Military," *Charlotte Observer*, November 15, 1992; John Monk, "Helms Denies He Made Deal on Gays in Military," *Charlotte Observer*, January 24, 1993.

letter to the *Washington Post* in June 1993. Goldwater served as honorary co-chair of Americans Against Discrimination, which sought federal protections against anti-gay job discrimination. "The big thing is to make this country, along with every other country in the world with a few exceptions," Goldwater told a reporter in 1994, "quit discriminating against people just because they're gay." "You don't have to agree with it, but they have a constitutional right to be gay. And that's what brings me into it."[45]

In October 1985, television producer and liberal activist Norman Lear circulated a piece entitled: "Thank you, Barry Goldwater." Although he disagreed with Goldwater on many issues, Lear said, he admired his "unswerving and courageous dedication to protecting the American system of government." In the 1980s, Goldwater opposed Jesse Helms's attempt to strip federal courts of their ability to prohibit school prayer in the public schools. "Did you really write this bill?" Goldwater once asked Helms. "If I wrote it, I would be ashamed," he added, describing the bill as equivalent to "outlawing the Supreme Court." Twenty years after the 1964 campaign, Lear said, Goldwater adhered to a political philosophy that was "conservative in the best sense of the word." Although Helms denounced the

[45] Lloyd Grove, "Barry Goldwater's Left Turn," *Washington Post*, July 28, 1994; Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater*, pp. 331-32.

"Norman Lear crowd" and claimed that Goldwater was "being used" by "leftwingers" and the liberal press, there was a ring of truth to Lear's assertions.[46]

By the time Barry Goldwater retired from the Senate, there were marked differences in the evolution of modern conservatism. Some of these differences perhaps reflected Goldwater's quirky political personality and his propensity to speak his mind, and over time he would become more and more estranged from the Republican mainstream.[47] But the divergence from Helms-style Republicanism also reflected real issues. The foot soldiers of the Reagan Revolution, many of them Christian evangelicals, had been mobilized by Helms and his allies. They brought a cluster of cultural and racial issues, and a political style, removed from Goldwater's conservatism.

In July 1981, these tensions erupted over the nomination of Sandra Day O'Connor for the Supreme Court. Religious Right groups initially opposed her because of suspect views on abortion; Helms led the opposition. Exasperated, Goldwater, who sponsored O'Connor's nomination, declared that the Moral Majority's Jerry Falwell deserved a "kick in his ass." He also told a *Washington Post* reporter in July 1981 that he did not like the "central issues, such as abortion, that Jesse Helms and his Moral Majority followers are pushing." Helms, Goldwater added, was not a true conservative. "If Jesse and his followers continue to operate

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[46] Grove, "Goldwater's Leftward Turn"; Norman Lear, "Thank You, Barry Goldwater," October 1985, BMG.

[47] Grove, "Goldwater's Leftward Turn."

this way," he warned, "we're going to see conservatism right back in the same fix we were in when I ran for president."[48]

Matters boiled over in mid-September 1981, when Goldwater offered a broader indictment. As the vote on O'Connor's nomination drew near—and as it appeared certain she would be confirmed—Goldwater spoke up. At a breakfast with reporters on September 15, 1981, he complained about groups using "religion as a basis for being for or against a political issue." There was a "danger in becoming oriented around a religious concept and then backing a political objective." Goldwater specifically criticized Helms, who, he said, represented "the New Right and not new conservatism." Goldwater had little interest in Helms's "social" issues—school busing, ERA, and abortion—and he thought that "more important things" were inflation, high interest rates, and having a strong military.[49]

Goldwater took his criticism to the Senate floor. It was, he said, "a wonderful feeling to be a conservative these days." When he ran for president in 1964, he was told that he was behind the times. Now, in contrast, "everybody tells me I was ahead of my time." Americans wanted a new, conservative course in public policy, and the "ideological pendulum" had swung widely, and the nature of politics and policy

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[48] Fred Barbush, "Conservatives Feud in Wake of O'Connor Choice," *Washington Post*, July 9, 1981; Albert R. Hunt and James M. Perry, "The Machine That Helms Built," *Washington Post*, July 26, 1981.

[49] Godfrey Sperling, Jr., "Goldwater Takes Issue with New Right Politics," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 16, 1981; Judith Miller, "Goldwater Vows to Fight Tactics of 'New Right,'" *New York Times*, September 16, 1981; 127 Cong. Rec. (1981) 20589-90, Senate, September 15, 1981; Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater*, pp. 315-16.

making to some extent had passed Goldwater by. Time, he reflected, was "certainly . . . an elusive companion." But the Reagan Revolution—and the coming to power of conservatives—had raised basic issues. True conservatism, he believed, lay in the principle of freedom, which was based on a "deep, abiding respect for the Constitution."

Those freedoms were now threatened by the "specter of single-issue religious groups," political activists with whom there could be "little or no compromise." Like any other weapon, the use of God's name should be used rarely, Goldwater believed. The Religious Right was not using its power wisely; conservative evangelicals required total assent rather than political compromise, and if you disagreed with them, "they cajole, they complain, they threaten you with loss of money or votes or both." Personally, Goldwater was "angry as a legislator who must endure the threats of every religious group who thinks it has some God-granted right to control my vote on every roll call in the Senate." The Religious Right's unwillingness to compromise was a "divisive element that could tear apart the very spirit of our representative system, if they gain sufficient strength." "I don't like the New Right," he declared. "What they're talking about is not conservatism." Troubles abroad, in Iran, Northern Ireland, and Lebanon, all resulted from "injecting religious issues into the affairs of state." "By maintaining the separation of church and state," Goldwater said, "the United States has avoided the intolerance which has so divided the rest of the world with religious wars." Goldwater promised to fight the Religious Right "every step of the way if they try to dictate their moral convictions to all Americans in the name of 'conservatism.'"

The following spring and summer, Goldwater's struggle with the New Right continued, as he opposed efforts to limit courts' jurisdiction in issues of busing, school prayer, and abortion. "How long before someone says that the courts can't hand down decisions on drunk driving, or rape or murder?" During an eight-month filibuster against efforts to limit the federal courts' jurisdiction, Goldwater supported the filibusters, saying that he had had a "stomachful" of the so-called social issues. In August, he voted with liberals in opposing Helms's efforts to enact legislation permitting school prayer.[50] "If they don't like it," Goldwater said about the Religious Right in 1982, "to hell with them."[51]

Helms and other movement conservatives were reluctant to criticize Goldwater, who enjoyed an iconic status something like that of Reagan. Although Helms opposed much of the Reagan administration's policies as pragmatic backsliding, he never found fault with Reagan himself. Notably, despite Goldwater's sharp criticisms of movement conservatives in the early 1980s, Helms never responded in kind. Jesse perhaps realized that Goldwater had become somewhat marginalized in his last term in the Senate, out of the mainstream, but he also had a residue of affection for the old conservative warrior.

Barry Goldwater and Jesse Helms represented two ends of the spectrum of modern conservatism, and their example reminds us that the Rightward Turn was a

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[50] David S. Broder, "Goldwater Lashes Religious Pressure," *Washington Post*, September 16, 1981.

[51] Steven V. Roberts, "'Conscience' of Conservatives Goes on the Attack," *New York Times*, March 11, 1982.

political and cultural phenomenon that was fraught with tension. In his recent book, *The Death of Conservatism*, Sam Tanenhaus charts the self-destruction of the modern American Right that culminated with the election of Barack Obama in 2008.[52] Although Tanenhaus does not explore them, internal tensions have always been present in modern conservatism. This paper has argued that the movement conservatives who looked to Jesse Helms for leadership, and who embraced matters of race and culture as defining issues, were at odds with the traditionally libertarian conservatism of Barry Goldwater. As a spokesman, advocate, and organizer of conservative evangelicals' political mobilization, Helms led the way in the turn toward cultural politics after the 1970s. The confluence of issues of race and culture made possible Reagan's election in 1980, and have remained driving forces in modern conservatism. It is possible to underestimate the importance of these phenomena, and of Jesse Helms specifically, but that is done at the peril of misunderstanding central tendencies in the political and cultural transformation of the past four decades.

[52] Sam Tanenhaus, *The Death of Conservatism* (New York: Random House, 2009).