

## Introduction: Quiet Down for “Jesse Time”

*Jesse Helms and the Making of Conservative Media in North Carolina*

The people - particularly the little people - are the ones who suffer most, because they lose *their* freedom *first*, and regain it, if at all, *last*. At the risk of sermonizing, it might be well to remind that America was founded by little people who wanted to be free. One important set of values hasn't changed since Biblical times: a birthright still is worth more than a mess of pottage.

- Jesse Helms, *Viewpoint* #69 (February 28, 1961)

When I started this project, I was interested in how Republican Jesse Helms, North Carolina's longest-serving senator, managed to make economic conservatism appealing for working-class whites in central and eastern North Carolina. I was raised in the western end of the state, so I was familiar with Helms as a senator, but no one around me growing up thought of him as a journalist. I did not learn until I came to UNC that he had risen to prominence as the voice of *Viewpoint*, an editorial series on WRAL radio and WRAL-TV. Helms's rhetorical style fascinated me, so I decided to explore his journalistic style for my thesis. As I was discussing the project with a research librarian, her eyes lit up as soon as I said that I was focusing on Helms's time hosting *Viewpoint*.

“Yeah, his editorials were insanely popular,” she told me. “I remember my mom telling me that whenever *Viewpoint* came on, my grandmother would tell all the kids to be quiet for ‘Jesse Time.’ No one came between her and Jesse.”

My jaw dropped. I knew that Helms must have had a profound impact on his viewers, but I was still not prepared for the phrase “Jesse Time.” Too much can be made of a single anecdote, but the further I got into the archives, the more I appreciated how powerful a presence Helms was in his viewers' lives. Unfortunately, I was unable to watch clips of *Viewpoint* because they

no longer exist, but even the transcripts of his editorials came alive for me in a way that articles from *National Review*, the leading journal of contemporary conservative opinion, did not. Helms knew how to speak about political philosophy and public policy in a way that made North Carolinians hush their children so they would not miss a word. Over the course of the 1960s, Helms's presence in North Carolina living rooms followed his audience to the polls, and a once solidly Democratic state grew more and more Republican.

What defined conservatism for the man who would then help define conservatism for the state of North Carolina and the GOP? Did his editorials merely synthesize the ideas of others into 10-minute television clips, or did he contribute intellectually to the rationale of American reactionism? Certainly, Helms drew upon the ideals of his philosophical peers and contemporaries. Echoes of William Buckley, Russell Kirk, and Frank Meyer resonated in Helms's Southern drawl on *Viewpoint*. But painting Helms as a member of the conservative intelligentsia of the 1960s would be disingenuous. Helms did not provide the conservative movement with unique ideas as did Kirk or Friedrich Hayek. Nor did he reframe conservatism to be more intellectually respectable in the style of Buckley or L. Brent Bozell. His combined two years at Wingate Junior College and Wake Forest College by no means made him an intellectual, and he did not serve in a major public office until he was elected to the Senate in 1972.<sup>1</sup> Instead, Helms proved himself vital to the conservative movement through journalism.

Of course, Helms was not a unique practitioner of conservative journalism. Buckley's *National Review* stood out as a bastion of conservative thought, and its frequent contributors were primarily print journalists from major newspapers. However, Helms's *Viewpoint* editorials

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<sup>1</sup> Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 25-26.

provided crucial conservative broadcast representation in North Carolina long before Buckley's foray onto national television with *Firing Line*, which first hit the air in 1966.<sup>2</sup> Television allowed Helms to do what print journalists could not: appear as himself in viewers' living rooms to speak to his audience as a friend or welcome guest. From his desk at the WRAL-TV station in Raleigh, Helms spoke directly to the people of central and eastern North Carolina. His fiery, reprimanding tone resonated in their hearts as he gave them words to express their anger and anxiety in a tumultuous time.<sup>3</sup>

Despite Helms's twelve years of proselytizing conservatism on air, he was not regarded as a major conservative media activist by his peers, nor has he been treated as such by historians. Helms's journalism career comprises two chapters of historian William Link's biography compared to ten chapters on his time in the Senate.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the journalistic achievements that jump-started Helms's Senate career have become vastly overshadowed by said Senate career. Historian Nicole Hemmer goes so far as to deny Helms the title of "media activist" on the grounds that "party politics" rather than conservative journalism was the senator's "home turf."<sup>5</sup> In fairness to Hemmer, the biggest names in conservative media also denied entry to Helms, and most likely for a similar reason.<sup>6</sup>

The first generation of conservative media activists primarily sought to prove their intellectual superiority and as such frowned upon the "common man" and attempts to pull him into the conservative fold for fear of tarnishing their image.<sup>7</sup> Helms, however, worked from the

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<sup>2</sup> Lee Edwards, *William F. Buckley Jr.*, 107.

<sup>3</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 51.

<sup>4</sup> Link, *Righteous Warrior*.

<sup>5</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 230.

<sup>6</sup> Buckley to Helms, January 30, 1962, box 20, folder 5, William F. Buckley, Jr. Papers.

<sup>7</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 92-96.

beginning of *Viewpoint* to convince his audience that the average American was conservative at heart and needed to wake up and rebel against the liberal minority. After Barry Goldwater's crushing defeat in the presidential election of 1964, conservative intellectuals realized that they needed a broad conservative majority - not an elite, highly intellectual minority - to triumph politically.<sup>8</sup> Helms knew this in 1960, and his populist approach both alienated him from other media activists and demonstrated his political savvy.

While Buckley and his peers at *National Review* offered intellectual credibility to the conservative movement, Helms provided political pragmatism and accessibility. As a former campaign advisor, Helms was deeply aware of the importance of connecting with the general public on an emotional level. While the conservative intelligentsia sneered at populist grassroots movements as "irresponsible conservatism" and grappled with liberals for intellectual supremacy, Helms shrewdly sought to bring the ideology formed in the ivory tower and pages of *National Review* to the people of Piedmont and coastal North Carolina. New Right intellectuals made American conservatism a respectable philosophy; Helms turned that philosophy into a viable political movement in North Carolina.

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<sup>8</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, xiv.

## Chapter 1: A Neglected Viewpoint

### *Helms and Conservative Media in a "Liberal" Nation*

The newspaper *reader*, who already is becoming skeptical of the perhaps peculiar rules of fair play in journalism, may wonder if he isn't entitled to the *facts* on both sides so that he -- the reader -- can make his own choice between liberalism and conservatism. The surest death for freedom of the press lies down the road of unfairness, partiality, and bias. America's free press should ponder the possibility that it may one day be its own executioner.

- Jesse Helms, *Viewpoint #2* (November 2, 1960)

A spectre haunted WRAL-TV - the spectre of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Established in 1934 to regulate American media, the FCC sought to ensure that broadcasters covered "controversial issues of public importance ... in a manner that was fair and balanced."<sup>1</sup> The agency's "fairness doctrine" was enacted in a 1949 report, *In the Matter of Editorializing by Broadcast Licensees*.<sup>2</sup> It consisted of two broad mandates: broadcasters must (1) devote a "reasonable portion" of airtime to important issues and (2) "affirmatively endeavor to make ... facilities available for the expression of contrasting viewpoints."<sup>3</sup> In Jesse Helms's eyes, this doctrine was both unreasonable and unevenly enforced, resulting in underrepresentation of conservative perspectives.<sup>4</sup> Seeing flagrant violations of the Fairness Doctrine by liberal news outlets motivated Helms -- if the liberal media would not cover conservative viewpoints, and the liberal government would not enforce its own rule, why not use their hypocrisy against them? Why not start a program to showcase the "contrasting viewpoint" other channels neglected to share?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Fairness Doctrine," 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 83-84.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 84 and *Viewpoint #7* (November 30, 1960), 1.

Helms thus became the voice of *Viewpoint*, an brashly conservative series of television editorials that aired from November 1960 to February 1972.<sup>6</sup> Helms often clashed with the FCC over his insistence on devoting his airtime to conservative voices, with only eye-rolling lip service to liberal perspectives. Helms confronted FCC warnings with bravado, only acknowledging the Fairness Doctrine by occasionally reading an angry letter from a liberal viewer on air.<sup>7</sup> To Helms, *Viewpoint* was part of a larger crusade for conservative journalism that stood alongside major publications like William F. Buckley Jr.'s *National Review*, and he believed that it deserved recognition as such.<sup>8</sup> *Viewpoint* ultimately carried Helms to the Senate in 1972.<sup>9</sup> But it is not enough to recognize only Helms's electoral accomplishments. In order to fully appreciate his contributions to the rise of the New Right, one must understand the particular "viewpoint" that he defended.

### **I. Jesse Helms's Political Background Before 1960**

May, 1950. Franklin Porter Graham, president of the University of North Carolina, had won the North Carolina Democratic primary for the Senate with 48.9% of the vote. His most prominent opponent, Raleigh lawyer and former Speaker of the North Carolina House of Representatives, Willis Smith, came in second with 40.5% of the vote. Under state law, Smith was entitled to a run-off, but he was reluctant to continue his campaign and initially accepted Graham's victory.<sup>10</sup> Smith's supporters, however, urged him to call for a run-off and snatch the election from Graham. What followed became known as one of North Carolina's most shameful

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<sup>6</sup> Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 70.

<sup>7</sup> See *Viewpoints* #12 (December 7, 1960) and #1078 (April 12, 1965) for examples.

<sup>8</sup> Helms to Buckley, January 25, 1962, box 20, folder 5, William F. Buckley, Jr. Papers.

<sup>9</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 192-193.

<sup>10</sup> Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 37.

elections.<sup>11</sup> That 1950 run-off Democratic primary election would not have happened without Jesse Helms.

Helms was WRAL radio's news manager at the time.<sup>12</sup> Fearful of the direction that Graham would take the Democratic Party in North Carolina, he was determined to push the much more conservative Smith into the Senate. Graham, who had been close with Eleanor Roosevelt and had served on Truman's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, stood out in Jim Crow-era Southern politics as racially and economically progressive. Smith was a typical Southern Democrat, racially and socially conservative.<sup>13</sup> When Smith shied away from calling for a run-off, Helms encouraged WRAL listeners to gather outside of Smith's Raleigh home to show their support for his continued campaign. The massive crowd gathered in Smith's yard, cheering him on and collecting donations, convinced Smith that a run-off election would be worth the effort.<sup>14</sup>

That effort took a harsh, but effective, turn from the previous campaign. Rather than focusing on Graham's economic stances, the run-off Smith campaign instead decried his desire for "forced racial integration," explicitly pleading with white voters to "wake up before it's too late."<sup>15</sup> Ads from Smith's "Know the Truth Committee" warned of a future North Carolina in which blacks and whites would share public restrooms and white women would be vulnerable to sexual assault by black men.<sup>16</sup> This campaign successfully converted white anxiety into conservative votes, and Smith rode the primary victory to Washington.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 36.

<sup>12</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>15</sup> "White People, Wake Up," political broadside, 1950.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 40.

Helms played a central role in Smith's election and learned an invaluable lesson in politics: effective journalists had the power to move large groups of people to action. He left WRAL radio in 1951 to serve Smith as a congressional aide, and after Smith's death in 1953, returned to Raleigh to accept a position as executive director of the North Carolina Bankers Association. He then returned to WRAL in 1960 to reprise his radio editorials as a nightly segment on WRAL-TV.<sup>18</sup> Helms came into his own, politically and professionally, during a boom in conservative thought and imminent fraying of the Democratic Party's tenuous coalition of Northern liberals and Southern conservatives.<sup>19</sup> He got a taste of victory in Washington only to return to Raleigh as a conservative in want of a party to call his own -- a party in which the likes of Graham and Smith would never be running in the same primary.

## **II. The Mythical Liberal Consensus of American Politics**

Following World War II, the world stood at an apparent crossroads of two ways of thinking: the individualistic capitalism of the West and the collectivistic communism of the East. The United States and the Soviet Union emerged from the war as new global superpowers and geopolitical enemies. Both scrambled for allies and satellite states in order to boost their economic and military security. It would not be enough to merely have more money or weapons than the other power; in order to draw in allies, keep one's own citizens loyal, and claim moral supremacy, the United States and Soviet Union each portrayed their own people as free from suffering and the other's people as crushed by the weight of oppression. Neither state could truly claim political harmony at home, but from an international standpoint, presenting a united front against the enemy was politically salient. Fortunately for the United States, an established sense

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 41-45, 70.

<sup>19</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 9.



of American exceptionalism fostered an assumption of ideological cohesion despite the political rifts deepening in the wake of the New Deal.

According to most American academics in the 1950s, the United States was a unique society due to Americans' universal devotion to liberal ideals.<sup>20</sup> In the title of his 1960 study of American political discourse, Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell boldly declared this phenomenon to be *The End of Ideology*.<sup>21</sup> Bell claimed that by the 1950s, political ideologies had largely become obsolete, and "sensible" people accepted capitalism and the liberal state as triumphant. Liberal politicians embraced the notion that Americans were in ideological agreement, as such a consensus would certainly prove politically expedient. In his opening remarks at the 1962 White House Conference on National Economic Issues, President John F. Kennedy shared Bell's conclusion as political fact:

I would like to also say a word about the difference between myth and reality. Most of us are conditioned for many years to have a political viewpoint, Republican or Democratic - liberal, conservative, moderate. The fact of the matter is that most of the problems, or at least many of them, that we now face are technical problems, are administrative problems. They are very sophisticated judgments which do not lend themselves to the great sort of "passionate movements" which have stirred this country so often in the past. Now they deal with questions which are beyond the comprehension of most men, most governmental administrators, over which experts may differ, and yet we operate through our traditional political system.<sup>22</sup>

The notion that Americans had reached a liberal consensus seemed plausible in the early 1960s. President Franklin Roosevelt had refashioned the term "liberal" itself when pushing for the New Deal, as "liberal" originally referred to the Lockean ideal of natural rights ensured by the minimization of government. Taking advantage of the alternative definition of "liberal" as a

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<sup>20</sup> Young, *Reconsidering American Liberalism*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Bell, *The End of Ideology*.

<sup>22</sup> Kennedy, "Remarks on National Economic Issues" (0:40-1:22).

synonym for “generous,” FDR appropriated the term to justify expanding governmental responsibility - and power - within a society largely opposed to big government.<sup>23</sup> The New Deal thus ushered in an era of government expansion while maintaining claims to a Lockean political heritage: the new liberals were not infringing upon natural rights, but expanding upon the government’s responsibility to protect those rights.<sup>24</sup> By Roosevelt’s broad definition of liberalism, most American discourse was firmly within liberal bounds, making the idea of ideological consensus plausible despite the term’s growing association with the left.<sup>25</sup> The “liberal consensus” played out electorally as well -- New Deal liberals dominated national politics for thirty years, and Roosevelt’s welfare state survived long after the Great Depression. This time in power and notion of unity, however, fostered a false sense of security for the liberal elite. Over the course of the 1960s, conservative activists radically disproved Kennedy’s assessment that the time of “passionate [ideological] movements” was past.

### **III. The Resurgence of Conservatism**

A renaissance of American conservative intellectualism was forged in the early days of the Cold War as a confluence of traditionalism, libertarianism, and anti-Communism.<sup>26</sup> The American conservative intelligentsia faced unique challenges in that they did not have the legacies of feudalism that characterized Burkean, European conservatism. Rather, they had to be both conservative and radical by asserting the necessity not of protecting what America had, but by re-establishing a glorious past that did not quite exist.<sup>27</sup> Political scientist Louis Hartz, for

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<sup>23</sup> Milkis and Mileur, “The New Deal, Then and Now,” 3-4 and Young, *Reconsidering American Liberalism*, 171.

<sup>24</sup> Milkis and Mileur, “The New Deal, Then and Now,” 4.

<sup>25</sup> See Young, *Reconsidering American Liberalism*, 6 for a breakdown of the multifaceted definition of “liberal” in American political history.

<sup>26</sup> Lee Edwards, *William F. Buckley Jr.*, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Young, *Reconsidering American Liberalism*, 2.

instance, thrust American conservatives into a difficult position in his 1955 work *The Liberal Tradition in America*. Hartz asserted that the United States, a nation founded via violent revolution and lacking the European history of feudalism, was fundamentally liberal in nature. Consequently, conservatism was inherently un-American.<sup>28</sup> Conservative intellectuals like Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver argued that conservatism sought to preserve “Western” Christian culture as opposed to American culture exclusively, but the Cold War political climate placed American exceptionalism at a high premium.<sup>29</sup> As such, the widely accepted claim that liberals represented the true “American” ideology put conservatives at a philosophical and political disadvantage.

Despite the influence and abundance of liberal academics, conservatives within academia found their footing in the postwar period through criticism of liberal ideology as a slippery slope into communism. Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek upset the mirage of an American political consensus in his 1944 critique of the welfare state in Britain, *The Road to Serfdom*. Although Hayek was not an American intellectual, his fears that the United Kingdom would fall to communism struck a chord among academics in the States, and political economists were quick to sing Hayek’s praises - or decry him as a paranoiac. The notoriety (if not necessarily popularity) of *The Road to Serfdom* prompted a deluge of conservative texts by American intellectuals, revealing that the Ivory Tower was not nearly as politically unified as liberals claimed.<sup>30</sup>

As conservative voices within elite universities grew louder, students began to scrutinize the notion that conservatism was intellectually invalid. One Yale University alumnus in

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<sup>28</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 288.

<sup>29</sup> Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 4 and Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 5-6.

particular launched a legendary career as a conservative ideologue with a manifesto for the inclusion of conservatism in higher education. William F. Buckley Jr., the son of a Connecticut oil tycoon, was the very model of an Ivy League student in the 1950s: wealthy, well-traveled, multilingual, and talented on the harpsichord.<sup>31</sup> But for all of his qualifications, Buckley felt alienated at Yale by the liberalism that professors promoted and other students accepted. In *God and Man at Yale* (1951), Buckley carried the disagreements around him to their logical conclusion: conservatism *was* intellectually valid, liberalism was setting the stage for societal descent into atheism and communism, and liberal academics were speeding the collapse by refusing to instruct students in Christianity and free market capitalism.<sup>32</sup>

Buckley's scathing critique of Yale's curriculum and of specific professors made quite a splash. Very, very few Americans would ever be directly affected by the academic culture at Yale, and Buckley had only graduated the year before *God and Man's* publication. However, his cry for a more conservative curriculum resounded throughout the nation as a general indictment of higher education as a betrayal of American ideals.<sup>33</sup> Such a claim naturally elicited powerful reactions: fellow conservatives like journalist John Chamberlain lauded Buckley's staunch traditionalism and contrarianism, while liberals painted him as a crackpot reliant upon anecdotal, misquoted, and outright falsified evidence.<sup>34</sup> McGeorge Bundy, a fellow Yale alumnus and future National Security Advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, reviewed *God and Man at Yale* as "a violent attack on the whole concept of academic freedom." Buckley, he wrote, "leaps

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<sup>31</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 38 and Lee Edwards, *William F. Buckley Jr.*, 17-19. For an example of Buckley's skill on the harpsichord, see *Firing Line*, Episode S0835 (17:21-26:51).

<sup>32</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, lxiii-lxiv.

<sup>33</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 25-27.

<sup>34</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 26 and Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 40-41.

from one view to another, as suits his convenience, and his view of the facts depends entirely on their usefulness to his argument.”<sup>35</sup> Scathing as they were, negative reviews did little to impede Buckley’s rise as a public intellectual. As liberal-controlled institutions continued to refuse conservatives academic platforms, conservatives built their own.

#### **IV. The Birth of Conservative Media**

Buckley, hard at work on his second book, 1954’s *McCarthy and His Enemies: the Record and Its Meaning*, was poised to push the envelope even further. Conservative books were difficult to publish and reached very few people, so Buckley was eager to enter the magazine industry instead.<sup>36</sup> Before 1953, the libertarian journal *Freeman* had sated conservative appetites, but editorial disagreements caused the journal to dissolve and left several conservative writers looking for a new home. Former *Freeman* editor Willi Schlamm and Buckley’s publisher Henry Regnery took *Freeman*’s collapse as a sign to create a new conservative journal. Schlamm and Regnery also believed that Buckley was the man to spearhead it.<sup>37</sup> So, in 1953 on a cold, New York December morning in Room 2233 of the Lincoln Building, *National Review* (known then by its working title, *National Weekly*) was conceived.<sup>38</sup>

Historians often cite Buckley as the father of conservative media, and for a good reason. With *National Review*, Buckley achieved what other conservative leaders had failed to do: he coherently merged different branches of conservatism in one publication.<sup>39</sup> Historian George Nash famously divided postwar conservatism into three main camps - the anti-communists, the

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<sup>35</sup> Bundy, “The Attack on Yale.”

<sup>36</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 40-41.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>39</sup> Lee Edwards, *William F. Buckley Jr.*, 12.

libertarians, and the traditionalists.<sup>40</sup> Due in part to the vast philosophical differences that separated these camps, liberal intellectuals and journalists ridiculed conservatism as illogical, ahistorical, and perhaps worst of all, un-American.<sup>41</sup> Buckley took the founding of *National Review* as an opportunity to unite the right and rebuff liberal criticism. *National Review* was to be something new, exciting, and above all, intelligent. In the inaugural issue in November 1955, Buckley assessed the world that *National Review* was entering:

We begin publishing, then, with a considerable stock of experience with the irresponsible Right, and a despair of the intransigence of the Liberals, who run this country; and all this in a world dominated by the jubilant single-mindedness of the practicing Communist, with his inside track to History. All this would not appear to augur well for *National Review*. Yet we start with a considerable — and considered — optimism.<sup>42</sup>

From the start, Buckley made his goals clear: distinguish true conservatives from the “irresponsible Right,” combat the liberal domination of media and politics, and provide alternative perspectives in the United States. To believe that a biweekly political journal could have such an impact was optimistic indeed, but that optimism panned out. Conservative media boomed, from print to radio to - in Helms’s case - television.

In forming their own media outlets, activists on the right expressed for the first time an argument that has now become a cornerstone of American conservatism: mainstream media have a liberal bias, and conservative media are necessary to counteract this ideological imbalance.<sup>43</sup> This was not to say that mainstream media simply did not share conservative perspectives. In Buckley, radio host Clarence Manion, and Helms’s view, the mainstream media grossly underreported conservative viewpoints and purposefully *misrepresented* conservatism. They

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<sup>40</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, xv-xvi.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-130, 136-137.

<sup>42</sup> Buckley, “Our Mission Statement.”

<sup>43</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, xii-xiii.

charged that liberal journalists presented conservatives as caricatured strawmen clinging to outdated and/or un-American ideals such as white supremacy.<sup>44</sup> Conservatives who fit this mold made the news while those who revealed a more nuanced and diverse reality suspiciously failed to appear in the inner pages of newspapers, much less on national TV.<sup>45</sup> As long as liberals controlled the media, most Americans would associate conservatism with the “irresponsible Right” that Buckley despised. But, this injustice was also an opportunity - if conservatives confronted liberal media bias and painted themselves as underdogs, they could undermine Americans’ trust in mainstream media and win more people to their side.<sup>46</sup>

By claiming that mainstream media were failing them, conservative media activists made a play for the moral high ground and fostered a sense of victimhood for their followers. Historian Bryan Hardin Thrift calls this tactic “pious incitement,” referring to a *Raleigh News and Observer* article that criticized Helms’s approach to journalism.<sup>47</sup> The term “pious incitement” was inspired by Helms, but the strategy of playing the victim of liberal oppression was common across conservative media. While Helms told his viewers not to waste their time looking for conservative representation in the *News and Observer*, Buckley insisted that *National Review* existed to counter the likes of the *New York Times*.<sup>48</sup>

Ostensibly, conservative media emerged with *National Review* and rippled out from Buckley’s intellectual splash. Historians of conservative media like Hemmer are quick to laud Buckley and to a lesser extent Manion and publisher Henry Regnery for their role in building the

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<sup>44</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 137 and *Viewpoint* #31 (January 4, 1961), 1.

<sup>45</sup> See *Viewpoint* #7 (November 30, 1960), 1.

<sup>46</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, xii-xiii.

<sup>47</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 10.

<sup>48</sup> *Viewpoint* #7 (November 30, 1960), 1 and Buckley, “Our Mission Statement.”

New Right.<sup>49</sup> At the national level, *National Review* was certainly a media breakthrough, but looking at the American media landscape from the top-down underestimates the importance of regional and local media. Shifting the focus to local media reveals that many conservatives had already found platforms, if not yet a unified voice.

In Helms's case, local conservative media in Piedmont North Carolina both predated and outpaced national conservative media in the 1950s and 1960s. Helms's radio editorials hit the air six years before the *Manion Forum*.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, *Viewpoint* reached television screens six years before Buckley's *Firing Line*.<sup>51</sup> Helms was clearly a savvy media activist, but his focus was far more regional in nature than Manion's or Buckley's. Over time, the different approaches of Helms and Buckley resulted in complementary roles for national and local conservative media. National conservative media, rather than building a movement from scratch, provided a language for conservatives on the ground and ran damage control when conservatives acted "irresponsibly." Local conservative media then translated the language of *National Review* into a regional dialect to strategically appeal to much smaller audiences. Poor white Democrats in the coastal plain of North Carolina were unlikely subscribers of *National Review*, but they heard the same rhetoric tailored to their interests and insecurities on WRAL-TV.<sup>52</sup>

## V. The Need for *Viewpoint*

The South in the 1950s and 1960s was on a political precipice. Counterintuitively, the most conservative area of the nation was also reliably Democratic despite the party's general shift to the left. For Helms, this paradox was frustrating. In 1960, he watched his home state elect

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<sup>49</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, xv-xvi.

<sup>50</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 18 and Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 46.

<sup>51</sup> Lee Edwards, *William F. Buckley Jr.*, 107.

<sup>52</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 50.



liberal Democrats like Kennedy to the White House and Terry Sanford to the Governor's mansion. But the ever-perceptive journalist realized that Tar Heels were not as uniformly blue as they had been in the past. Indeed, had it not been for the poor white vote in the eastern part of the state, North Carolina could have gone red.<sup>53</sup> Helms also knew from his experience in the Willis Smith campaign that when all else failed, the right voice on the radio could turn out voters in Piedmont and eastern North Carolina. Thus, when WRAL-TV president Alfred J. Fletcher offered him the position of vice president of the Raleigh-based Capitol Broadcasting, Helms left the *Tarheel Banker* to become the voice of conservatism in North Carolina living rooms.<sup>54</sup>

Helms had hesitated to commit to WRAL-TV, but he was ultimately driven by a sense of duty to the conservative cause to leave his more secure job with the Bankers Association.<sup>55</sup> In a letter to the association, he stated that “the compelling factor in my decision was the opportunity to provide ‘another’ voice for this area. At present, our people are being brainwashed by a press monopoly which constantly slants down the left-wing line.”<sup>56</sup> Helms was not out to become a television star. He wanted to right a wrong, speak for the people, and most of all, make North Carolinians as conservative as possible - culturally, economically, and politically. With the right platform, causes, and tone, Helms knew that he could bring viewers to share his “viewpoint.”

From *Viewpoint's* outset, Helms pulled no punches and made his goal to disrupt North Carolina media clear. In his second editorial, he asserted that “there is substantial evidence to indicate that many North Carolinians are becoming increasingly distrustful of the major daily newspapers they read” because “the daily press in North Carolina virtually ignores the Southern,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 47.

conservative viewpoint.” He did not specify what his evidence was, and even hedged that “nobody can say with accuracy to what extent this public attitude may exist.”<sup>57</sup> The subtext of his claim, however unsubstantiated, was transparent: liberal newspapers were the problem, and conservative media like *Viewpoint* were the remedy. Better yet, Helms was not forcing that remedy down people’s throats. The *people* distrusted newspapers. The *people* wanted *Viewpoint*.

*Viewpoint* first aired on WRAL-TV on November 21, 1960, thereafter following a schedule of five editorials a week. WRAL-TV broadcasted the five-minute editorials at 6:20 PM and 7:25 AM the next morning, and WRAL radio replayed them at 6:55 PM and 7:55 AM the same day.<sup>58</sup> Helms wrote and delivered the vast majority of the editorials, although guest speakers would occasionally substitute - most often a pastor on Christian holidays and Chub Seawell as a stand-in when Helms was traveling or otherwise unavailable.

*Viewpoint* stood out as an explicitly conservative television show, which was prohibitively difficult to maintain in the 1960s. Television stations were typically more reluctant to broadcast conservative programs than radio stations. This was primarily because television programs were more expensive than radio shows and relied heavily upon advertisers for funding. Firms in the early 1960s were often uninterested in sponsoring conservative programming for fear that their company being associated with controversial beliefs, making advertising an unreliable source of funding. Conservative broadcasters instead had to rely upon viewer donations, which worked fairly well for lower-cost radio spots, but usually could not sustain more expensive television airtime.<sup>59</sup> The *Manion Forum* demonstrated this phenomenon of conservative radio being easier to maintain than conservative television quite clearly: Manion’s

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<sup>57</sup> *Viewpoint* #2 (November 22, 1960), 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Viewpoint* #9 (December 2, 1960), 1.

<sup>59</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 110-111.

radio program ran consistently on listener donations for 25 years, while his television program was canceled in the late 1960s after only a few years on air.<sup>60</sup> To have a conservative television show as unabashed and inflammatory as *Viewpoint* begin in 1960 and run for eleven years was a remarkable feat in the 1960s media environment.

Helms's television success stemmed in large part from his connections to the leadership of Capitol Broadcasting, which owned WRAL radio and WRAL-TV. Helms and A.J. Fletcher got to know each other in the late 1940s when Helms first made the jump from print to broadcast media.<sup>61</sup> When Helms returned to North Carolina from his brief stint as Senator Smith's congressional aide, Fletcher began courting him to return to Capitol Broadcasting as a reporter for the newly acquired WRAL-TV. Fletcher suspected that television was the future of news media, noting in 1957 that "if there are as many TV homes as there are newspaper homes after only a few years of TV operation, then what may we expect say in ten or fifteen years."<sup>62</sup> Television was on the rise, and Fletcher desperately wanted a compelling, conservative voice on his channel. Having witnessed Helms's influence in the 1950 Senate election, Fletcher was certain that he was the right voice for "Channel 5."<sup>63</sup>

Helms took on the challenge of establishing himself as something revolutionary in 1960: a conservative television personality. And what a personality he was. Having dabbled in both newspapers and radio, Helms understood that broadcast journalism required a different tone and style. How he said something was just as important as what he said, so he sometimes practiced for hours to achieve the tone that he wanted (a tone that critics referred to as "mean-spirited" and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>61</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 18.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 43. Punctuation is Fletcher's.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 43.

“sarcastic”).<sup>64</sup> At the same time, tone referred to more than just the sound of his voice. Helms wanted to break poor white viewers from the Democratic coalition, and race-baiting was clearly the easiest thread to pull. But an increasingly self-conscious white population in the South resented being called “racist,” and overt racial appeals were quickly falling out of fashion.<sup>65</sup> Helms needed to be much more subtle with his racial rhetoric than he had been in 1950. Helms’s determination to appeal to working-class whites set him apart from conservative media activists operating at the national level. For one, he had the knowledge, means, and desire to tailor his editorials to such a small audience with near surgical precision. He also prioritized turning more potential voters into conservatives over portraying conservatism as exclusively for the intellectually elite. Unlike Buckley, Helms was not one to fret on air about “responsible” versus “irresponsible” conservatives. Helms could play nicely with controversial and violent groups like the John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan, so long as they voted Republican.<sup>66</sup> He always held himself to the standard of “responsible” conservatism, but from a political standpoint, he had no interest in gatekeeping. Buckley understood that conservatives needed to improve their national reputation, while Helms understood that they were in no position to turn away supporters. As a result, Buckley painted conservatism as the ideology of the few Americans intelligent enough to understand it, whereas Helms portrayed conservatism as the natural perspective of most Americans.<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, Helms’s populism proved to be a more successful and sustainable strategy than Buckley’s elitism.

## **VI. Creating a Conservative Movement in North Carolina through Media**

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 51 and Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 71.

<sup>65</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 6; Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 116.

<sup>66</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 53-54, *Viewpoint #127* (May 19, 1961), 2-3, and *Viewpoint #1069* (March 30, 1965), 1-2.

<sup>67</sup> *Viewpoint #22* (December 21, 1960), 1-2.

Both Helms's contemporaries and media historians have largely excluded him from the pantheon of conservative media activists. Hemmer mentions him only twice in her history of conservative media and even states that Helms should not be considered a media activist. "He owned a radio station and used that platform to tremendous effect," she writes, "but party politics was the senator's home turf."<sup>68</sup> This is a specious assessment. Hemmer's facts are not quite straight - Helms did not own WRAL or WRAL-TV. Fletcher was the station owner and Helms was the leading journalist. Hemmer also denies Helms the title of "conservative media activist" on the grounds that he was more devoted to the Republican Party than conservatism or its presence in media. Although Helms was certainly instrumental in the GOP's eventual success in 1960s North Carolina, to claim that he was more partisan than ideological is a gross misunderstanding of his motivations and contributions to the conservative movement. In order to appreciate Helms's role in the construction of the New Right, one must understand him as *both* an ideologue and a pragmatic political organizer.

From the outset, Helms was transparent in his commitment to conservatism above all else. One of the first *Viewpoint* editorials to hit the air established a mission statement of sorts. WRAL-TV was "non-partisan," Helms declared, and "frankly ... not satisfied with either of the two major political parties on the national level."<sup>69</sup> Rather, Helms and the editorial board of WRAL-TV

[did not] care which party balances the budget ... calls a halt to the myriad of give-away programs ... honestly sets about a program of tax reduction ... does something to prevent the further deterioration of the dollar bill ... first wakes up to the undeniable fact that a great nation must be built and maintained by hard work, imagination and initiative ... decides to get the government's nose out of your business ... [or] decides to quit playing politics with minority groups for political purposes ... just so one of them does.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 230.

<sup>69</sup> *Viewpoint* #9 (December 2, 1960), 2.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

This declaration of ideological intent was quite similar to the policy that Buckley would famously adopt seven years later when he stated that *National Review* would endorse the most conservative, electorally viable candidates.<sup>71</sup> Going into WRAL-TV, Helms recognized that the GOP was the most likely choice to mold into the ideal party that he described in *Viewpoint #9*. However, that cannot be confused for an unconditional devotion to the Republican Party, as Hemmer implies. Rather, Helms wanted to make the most conservative, electorally viable party possible, and ultimately used the GOP for that purpose.<sup>72</sup>

At first, Helms's flirtation with partisan realignment remained behind the scenes. On air, Helms spent the early 1960s speaking in ideological terms exclusively and approached both parties as an outsider. His take on the 1960 presidential election was a case in point. John F. Kennedy won the election with 303 electoral votes to Richard Nixon's 219.<sup>73</sup> Illinois, an important swing state at the time, cast its 27 electoral votes to Kennedy because Chicago voted Democratic. Immediately after the election, Republicans in the Prairie State accused the Kennedy campaign of colluding with Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley and his political machine in a fraud scheme to steal the state from Nixon.<sup>74</sup> Although Illinois Republicans failed to provide compelling evidence fraud, many journalists jumped on the story that Kennedy "stole" the election from Nixon.<sup>75</sup> Naturally, Helms had his own interpretation of events in Chicago to share with his North Carolina audience. Helms sardonically declared 1960 to be "the age of miracles" in which an unspecified Chicago precinct with 22 registered voters counted 84 votes.<sup>76</sup> He then

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<sup>71</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 207.

<sup>72</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 54.

<sup>73</sup> "1960 Presidential Election," *270 to Win*.

<sup>74</sup> Kallina, *Kennedy v. Nixon*, 183.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-186.

<sup>76</sup> *Viewpoint #6* (November 29, 1960), 1.

reasoned that that meant that “22 registered voters ... must have voted four times apiece -- and the last time [I] checked, this was just a little on the illegal side.” But despite this caustic indictment of Illinois Democrats and the Kennedy campaign, Helms spoke from outside the Republican Party. He signed off by saying that the decision to challenge the election results was up “to the Republicans -- for it’s their kettle of fish.”<sup>77</sup> Helms clearly sympathized with the Republican Party in the early 1960s, but he continued to divorce himself rhetorically from partisan politics. Instead, he painted political issues in terms of conspirator and victim long before explicitly naming the conspirators as Democrats and the victims as Republicans.

As the 1960s progressed, Helms began to encourage partisan realignment in order to rally conservatives to the GOP. This tactic stemmed from Helm’s desire for an electable, deeply conservative political party, not from a particular loyalty to the Republicans. Originally, Helms was quick to come to the defense of conservative Southern Democrats like Strom Thurmond, but the Goldwater campaign in 1964 ultimately confirmed his suspicions that Southern conservatives would find a better home in the GOP than in the Democratic Party that had dominated the region since the end of Reconstruction.<sup>78</sup>

Arizona senator Barry Goldwater took office in 1953 and quickly proved himself to be the leader that conservatives craved. By attacking labor unions and urging the GOP to further embrace economic conservatism, Goldwater made a name for himself and demonstrated his usefulness to the conservative movement.<sup>79</sup> To capitalize on the opportunity for a competitive conservative candidate, L. Brent Bozell Jr., brother-in-law of Buckley and co-author of *McCarthy and His Enemies*, ghostwrote a political manifesto in Goldwater’s name. It became the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>78</sup> *Viewpoint #104* (April 18, 1961), 1.

<sup>79</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 139.

iconic 1960 bestseller *The Conscience of a Conservative*.<sup>80</sup> The book convincingly and concisely made the case for conservatism as “the key to national salvation” and the best defense against immorality, laziness, and of course, communism.<sup>81</sup> The release of *The Conscience of a Conservative* coincided with the premiere of *Viewpoint* on WRAL-TV, and Helms sang the Arizona senator’s praises. He endorsed Goldwater for president in 1964.<sup>82</sup>

Though Goldwater suffered a humiliating defeat to Lyndon B. Johnson, Helms and his fellow conservative media activists had made great strides in making conservatism politically relevant, and were ready to learn from Goldwater’s failure. Helms took Goldwater’s defeat and public reactions to it as a chance to double-down on the narrative of the liberal media brainwashing Americans into voting against their true beliefs. Throughout the campaign, Goldwater drew criticisms from liberals and even some conservatives for his refusal to condemn the constant thorn in conservatives’ side, the John Birch Society.<sup>83</sup>

The John Birch Society drew national attention to the conservative movement, but not the kind of attention that conservative media activists desired. Founded in 1958 by North Carolina native Robert Welch, the John Birch Society was virulently anti-communist and carried McCarthy-esque paranoia into the 1960s.<sup>84</sup> Welch and the “Birchers” made their biggest splash in 1961 with the release of *The Politician*, a 302-page book that accused several notable politicians, including former president Dwight D. Eisenhower, of harboring communist sympathies.<sup>85</sup> While Birchers often avoided the blatantly racist or anti-Semitic rhetoric of other

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 141-143.

<sup>81</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 4.

<sup>82</sup> *Viewpoint* #12 (December 7, 1960), 2-3.

<sup>83</sup> “Goldwater Ready to Meet Johnson on Race Tensions,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1964.

<sup>84</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 93 and Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 293.

<sup>85</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 93.



far-right organizations, their anti-communist paranoia tainted the entire conservative movement in the early 1960s.<sup>86</sup>

Journalists often pressed Goldwater for his stance on the Society and Welch, delighting in his popularity among the controversial group and the revelation that Goldwater had unknowingly joined a Bircher front society in 1959.<sup>87</sup> Liberal journalists consistently highlighted the far-right organization's support for Goldwater, tarnishing his reputation and leading Helms to wonder aloud on *Viewpoint* why the far left's support for Lyndon Johnson failed to receive the same coverage.<sup>88</sup> According to Helms, news reports on "rightwing extremists" fostered complacency towards communists in the United States.<sup>89</sup> By insisting that talk about the far right was only meant to distract the American public from the much bigger threat of the far left, Helms further convinced his supporters that mainstream media were manipulating them.

North Carolina went for Johnson in 1964, but Helms's work was clearly having an impact. Letters from viewers flooded WRAL's mailbox, and Nixon won the Tar Heel State in 1968.<sup>90</sup> Helms managed to turn an embarrassing national defeat into a regional opportunity to encourage loyal Democrats in North Carolina to make the switch to the GOP. When two Southern Democrats in the House of Representatives endorsed Goldwater for president - Mississippi's John Bell Williams and South Carolina's Albert Watson - and were subsequently stripped of their privileges within the Democratic Party, Helms asserted that the time had come for Southern conservatives to abandon the Democrats. "The only antidote," he claimed, "for [the]

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<sup>86</sup> Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 293.

<sup>87</sup> "Birch Leader Outlines Members' Campaign Role," *New York Times*, July 23, 1964, 16 and "Goldwater Denies Knowing He Joined Birch Front Group," *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 1964, 16.

<sup>88</sup> *Viewpoint* #1129 (June 22, 1965), 1.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>90</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 173.

maddening trend [of conservative Democrats being shunned] is the elusive hope of party realignment [sic].”<sup>91</sup> As North Carolinians tuned into WRAL-TV day after day, that hope became a reality.

While Helms’s role in partisan realignment was impressive in and of itself, convincing viewers in eastern North Carolina to embrace conservatism was far more difficult than one might guess. Whites in the region were deeply socially conservative but benefitted from liberal economic policies, which from the time of the New Deal had made them tolerant of sharing a party with African-Americans.<sup>92</sup> Even racists have to eat, after all. Helms understood this and realized that if he could adequately entangle all forms of liberalism, whites in eastern North Carolina could be moved to become economically conservative as well. Helms told his viewers five times a week that the people they despised - communists, blacks, civil rights activists, Yankee busy-bodies - were involved in a grand conspiracy to oppress them, and used the mainstream media to distract them from the plot. Poor white North Carolinians, already down on their luck and eager to blame African Americans and Soviets, accepted this narrative and eventually their new partisan identity. Helms’s populist approach to conservative media cut across the class lines that kept North Carolina blue, demonstrating a rhetorical allure that more intellectual conservative media activists lacked.

## **VII. Elite Populism vs. Little Man Populism**

In 1946, subscriptions to the conservative journal *Human Events* skyrocketed. Much to the frustration of publisher Henry Regnery, however, the journal still managed to run at a deficit despite the rise in subscriptions. Increased publishing costs necessitated more subscribers to

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<sup>91</sup> *Viewpoint* #1009 (January 5, 1965), 2.

<sup>92</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 47.

yield a profit, so Regnery urged *Human Events* editors Felix Morley and Frank Hanighen to make their journal more accessible and appealing for a mass audience. Regnery emphasized the financial and political benefits of building a larger following, but Morley and Hanighen remained hesitant to sacrifice their intellectual integrity for popularity. To the elitists in conservative media circles, “catering to the mass opinion of ill-informed persons” would “compromise [their] basic position” that their work was academic rather than popular in nature.<sup>93</sup> As historian Nicole Hemmer argues, the first generation of conservative journalists generally sought to be “read by a small number of elite opinion makers, who then circulated the ideas to the masses through policy, popular media, and public stances” rather than deigning to appeal to the common man.<sup>94</sup>

National conservative media activists in the 1950s and 1960s thus had two goals that were, if not mutually exclusive, difficult to achieve simultaneously in a democratic society: to remain an elite and exclusive group through gatekeeping and to attain more political power. Hemmer characterizes conservative media activists as sharing a singular strategy of “elite populism,” an oxymoronic term revealing the tensions between the need both to intellectualize and to popularize conservatism. Hemmer defines elite populism as the argument that conservatives were “an oppressed minority, despite their access to traditional sources of economic, social, and political power.”<sup>95</sup> The “elite” in elite populism refers to the status of the activists and the audiences that they originally hoped to win over. Conservative media activists did not become truly populist until Goldwater’s defeat in 1964 proved the necessity of forming a conservative majority.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, *National Review* editor Frank Meyer declared in 1968 that

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<sup>93</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 35-36.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

populism was “the radical opposite of conservatism.”<sup>97</sup> How, then, could conservative media activists be deemed populists, even with the qualifier “elite”?

Political scientist James P. Young defines American populism as the “principle ... that all politics tends to come down to a conflict between ... the overwhelming mass of the people as a whole and a small number of vested interests marked by a strong tendency toward conspiratorial action” and is guided by “the concept of majority rule, a belief in the beneficence and capability of the common man, and a theory of participatory democracy.”<sup>98</sup> Populism, then, is focused on the equal distribution of political (as opposed to socioeconomic) privilege without fear of tyranny of the majority. A throughline in American populism is the notion that safeguards against the tyranny of the majority to protect the rights of political minorities have gone too far. Populists argue that trespasses against the rights of the majority are masked by the political elite as safeguards for minority rights. Critically, the terms “majority” and “minority” in this context are not inherently racial and only occasionally and indirectly socioeconomic in nature. As I will elaborate in the next chapter, the Populist Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries crossed racial lines in the South.<sup>99</sup> Overall, populism in the United States has been characterized by a sense that a powerful minority controls American politics to the detriment of the political majority, making Hemmer’s claim that conservative media activists in 1950s and early 1960s were populists questionable. Conservative activists could not simultaneously claim to be the political minority and the victims of liberal minority oppression.

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<sup>97</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 208.

<sup>98</sup> Young, *Reconsidering American Liberalism*, 139.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 143. See also Escott’s *Many Wonderful People*, 247-261, for more details on the biracial nature of populism in 1890s North Carolina and the white supremacy campaign that followed.

Helms, on the other hand, established himself as the populist figure that the intellectually elite conservative media activists could never be. Rather than adopting the title of political minority with elitist pride, Helms asserted that the *majority* of Americans were conservative at heart, and as such should claim the political dominance that participatory democracy owed them. Like other conservative journalists, Helms lamented the allure of liberal rhetoric for Everyman, but rather than resign the masses to liberalism, he urged them - “the little people” - to “[make] a big decision ... to sacrifice in order to do their bit to protect the heritage of America.”<sup>100</sup>

Rather than “elite populism,” Helms practiced what I call “little-man populism.” Like elite populism, little-man populism hinged upon the belief that liberals denied conservatives access to political power in spite of conservatives’ access to other means of socioeconomic privilege. Unlike elite populism, little-man populism posited that the average white American was conservative and working or middle class, and that the African-American minority interest in particular was manipulating the federal government into infringing upon the everyman’s rights. The racial element of little man populism provided the suspicion of minority conspiracy that usually characterizes American populism that elite populism lacked. However, little man populism must be understood as distinct from racial populism, nativism, or fascism. Helms was not a white supremacist in the pseudo-scientific, “biological” sense. He argued that African Americans were more conservative as a whole than the liberal media would have the public believe, and often cited his personal encounters with anonymous African Americans or conservative black leaders as evidence that the minority controlling political institutions was in fact a political minority *within* a racial minority.<sup>101</sup> This approach allowed Helms to garner both a

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<sup>100</sup> *Viewpoint* #95 (April 5, 1961), 1.

<sup>101</sup> *Viewpoint* #187 (August 28, 1961), 2.

degree of racial neutrality and the loyalty of anxious Southern whites in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement.

Though they were members of the same movement, Helms and the elite media activists developed these different strategies to reach different ends. Conservative journalists like Buckley, Bozell, and Meyer were more concerned with proving the intellectual validity of American conservatism, whereas Helms was more interested in convincing more people to vote conservative. Both goals were important for the conservative movement in the 1950s and 1960s, but the intellectual media activists found themselves floundering for a strategy to make their academically-validated ideology politically relevant. They feared that allowing grassroots organizations like the John Birch Society to identify as “conservative” would tarnish their intellectual reputation, leading Buckley to attack the organization repeatedly for being “irresponsible” conservatives.<sup>102</sup> While Buckley’s gatekeeping was a logical tactic to keep conservatism exclusive, it made little sense from an electoral standpoint. Enter Helms.

Unlike other major conservative journalists, Helms had minimal formal education. He attended Wingate Junior College for one year before transferring to Wake Forest College to study journalism, but he was “an indifferent student” with “little intellectual curiosity.”<sup>103</sup> He then left Wake Forest to become a reporter for *The Raleigh Times*.<sup>104</sup> While elite media activists cut their teeth at Yale or the University of Chicago, Helms instead developed his personal philosophy through working first as a journalist and then as a banking lobbyist. On the ground in Raleigh, Helms developed a talent for editorializing and a keen sense of political strategy. He picked up on the frustrations and anxieties of the public and used them on the radio and later

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<sup>102</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 193.

<sup>103</sup> Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 25-26.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

television to swing elections. Such a skill-set was profoundly valuable for a burgeoning conservative media and political movement, and Helms considered himself a pioneer alongside those at *National Review* and *Human Events*.<sup>105</sup> Those journalists, however, largely disagreed.

The brief correspondence between Helms and Buckley in the 1960s demonstrates Helms's exclusion. Helms admired Buckley's work and donated to *National Review*. He wrote to Buckley in January 1962 after learning that he was planning a trip to North Carolina. He invited Buckley to visit WRAL-TV to learn about the station's work "on behalf of conservatism" and "the hell [it was] catching from the FCC."<sup>106</sup> Buckley responded five days later at the end of his trip. He apologized for not stopping by and assured Helms that he knew of his "wonderful work and hope[d] some day to compliment [him] on it."<sup>107</sup> Perhaps it was only an unfortunate mismatch of schedules that prevented Buckley from visiting WRAL-TV, but the fact that no one in Buckley's entourage notified Helms in advance that he would be visiting North Carolina reads much more as a snub than an oversight.<sup>108</sup>

Given their vastly different stances on groups like the Birchers, it is unsurprising that the media elite kept Helms at arm's length. As Thrift points out, Helms accepted fringe organizations much more readily than other conservative journalists, likely due to "the South['s] long history of respectable extremism."<sup>109</sup> Most of the major conservative media activists hailed from the Midwest or New England and preferred to distance themselves from the blatant racial politics of Southern conservatives.<sup>110</sup> As such, when the Birchers drew national media attention

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<sup>105</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 8.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. and Helms to Buckley, January 25, 1962, box 20, folder 5, William F. Buckley, Jr. Papers.

<sup>107</sup> Buckley to Helms, January 30, 1962, box 20, folder 5, William F. Buckley, Jr. Papers.

<sup>108</sup> Helms to Buckley, January 25, 1962, box 20, folder 5, William F. Buckley, Jr. Papers.

<sup>109</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 54.

<sup>110</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 116.

for their racism and wild paranoia about communism, Buckley was quick to blacklist Welch and later the Society as a whole.<sup>111</sup> Helms, on the other hand, amusedly commended the John Birch Society for “get[ting] on the nerves of its enemies.”<sup>112</sup> In the crisis of the John Birch Society, Buckley prioritized intellectual respectability, while Helms chose not to make enemies with a conservative voting bloc. In the end, Helms’s approach proved more fruitful. Liberals would always find conservatism illogical, but logic does not win elections. People win elections - even “irresponsible” people.

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 163, 193.

<sup>112</sup> *Viewpoint #127* (May 19, 1961), 1.



## Chapter 2: Violent Non-Violence

### *Helms on Racial Inequality During the Civil Rights Movement*

Click off the catch-phrases, and the picture becomes clear. “Non-violence” has come to mean the use of switch-blade knives, the hurling of brickbats, the looting and destruction of stores and shops... “Equality” is the process of denying another man his property rights by Supreme Court edict. “Freedom” is what those 8,000 hoodlums at the University of California were enjoying when they participated in a riot...and “responsibility” is merely a matter of doing anything you want to do - just so long as you persuade yourself that it’s all right.

- Jesse Helms, *Viewpoint #1005* (December 29, 1964)

In February 1960, a group of four African-American students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College sat at a whites-only counter at a Woolworth’s in Greensboro, North Carolina, and demanded to be served. Like most establishments in the South, Woolworth’s was racially segregated. When Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr. and David Richmond disregarded Woolworth’s company policy by sitting at the white counter’s green and red vinyl seats, they started a sit-in movement that would expand across the South with more than 70,000 participants.<sup>1</sup> The protest in Greensboro stretched on for six months until the Woolworth’s officially desegregated on July 25, 1960.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the Greensboro sit-in is widely heralded as a pinnacle of peaceful protest. Skip Alston, a commissioner for Guilford County in 2018, once referred to the lunch counter as “holy ground.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the counter is no longer in the Woolworth’s and now has a place of honor in the Smithsonian, where an atmosphere of awe transforms the dated chrome chairs into an altar of justice and equality.<sup>4</sup> Then and now, the lunch counter represented more than a place to eat a

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<sup>1</sup> “Greensboro sit-in: A movement begins,” *TCA Regional News* (Chicago, IL), Jan. 31, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> “Greensboro Lunch Counter,” The National Museum of American History.

<sup>3</sup> “Greensboro sit-in: A movement begins,” *TCA Regional News* (Chicago, IL), Jan. 31, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> “Greensboro Lunch Counter,” The National Museum of American History.

sandwich or grab a cup of coffee. By sitting at a white counter, those four students demonstrated the arbitrariness, injustice, and fragility of the Jim Crow system of racial hierarchy.

To many whites across the South, the Greensboro sit-in was neither holy nor just. Some voiced their rage through explicit racism and violence. Others kept their heads down but denigrated the protesters' refusal to obey the law. Over time, the former option became decreasingly socially acceptable and explicit racism gave way to more subtle, covert expressions of prejudice and white anxiety.<sup>5</sup> Rather than calling for his viewers to attack protesters sitting-in at segregated establishments, for instance, Helms criticized the movement's premise that unjust laws should not be followed as a slippery slope into anarchy.<sup>6</sup> As historian Kevin M. Kruse described in his study of white flight and segregationist politics in Atlanta, "white southern conservatives were forced to abandon their traditional, populist, and often starkly racist demagoguery and instead craft a new conservatism predicated on the language of rights, freedom, and individualism."<sup>7</sup> Jesse Helms popularized this new language of racial conservatism from a sound-stage at WRAL-TV without sacrificing the populist strategy that had long been effective in North Carolina politics.

Helms was sincere in his beliefs. As historian William A. Link remarked in the preface to his biography of Helms, "his opponents and supporters alike agree that Jesse Helms possessed a certain sort of transparency: he meant what he said, and he said what he meant."<sup>8</sup> The inequalities of race and economic status in the American South were blatant, from "whites only" water fountains to black sharecroppers' ramshackle houses. Any denial of socioeconomic

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<sup>5</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 5-7.

<sup>6</sup> *Viewpoint* #7 (November 30, 1960), 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Link, *Righteous Warrior*, xi.

disparities in North Carolina could be easily thwarted by snapshots from black neighborhoods in Durham. However, liberals like Martin Luther King Jr. and conservatives like Helms understood the roots of these inequalities in fundamentally different ways. While liberals perceived socioeconomic inequality to be systemic in nature, Helms asserted that inequality occurred at the individual level. One's status was determined not by skin color or family name, but by responsibility and determination.<sup>9</sup> This was certainly the "language of rights, freedom, and individualism" that Kruse describes, and Helms's consistent logic and sincerity were essential to his appeal and impact.<sup>10</sup>

To Helms, the questions plaguing 1960s America were not about hierarchy versus equality, rich versus poor, or white versus black, and his rhetoric reflected that. The key question was justice, but he considered the purposeful disobedience of the law practiced in the Greensboro sit-in and throughout the Civil Rights Movement to be at best counterintuitive and at worst despicable.<sup>11</sup> The ultimate concern in 1960s America in Helms's eyes was the question of "progress, and how to achieve it."<sup>12</sup> While liberals pursued progress by fighting for the rights and dignity of collective groups, Helms sought to prioritize the individual - the moral, responsible, often white individual - in order to guide the nation through the turbulent decade. Ultimately, by framing issues of racial inequality through the lens of individual responsibility, Helms was able to protect hierarchies of power that benefited him practically without approving them explicitly. In this way, Helms packaged racial conservatism to be politically palatable while maintaining his integrity and legitimacy in the eyes of his viewers.

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<sup>9</sup> See *Viewpoint #1127* (June 18, 1965).

<sup>10</sup> See *Viewpoint #1032* (February 5, 1965) on viewer correspondence.

<sup>11</sup> See *Viewpoints #7* (November 30, 1960), *1056* (March 11, 1965), and *1223* (November 9, 1965) for examples.

<sup>12</sup> *Viewpoint #1127* (June 18, 1965), 1.

## I. Racial Inequality and the Civil Rights Movement

Since Helms did not perceive socioeconomic inequality to be structural in nature, he did not believe that any particular group of people suffered oppression on a societal or institutional scale. If a group was disproportionately impoverished or imprisoned, Helms saw this as evidence of immorality rather than misfortune. This perspective made him hostile to African Americans and the activists in the Civil Rights Movement in particular. In his eyes, the Civil Rights Movement was a violent and needless confluence of identity politics and liberal ideology: collective black identity fused with welfare culture to foster a victim complex and sense of entitlement.<sup>13</sup> Civil rights activists demanded respect and prosperity, which Helms believed could only be earned through personal responsibility - a trait he thought most African Americans lacked.<sup>14</sup> Link argues in *Righteous Warrior* (2008) that Helms “transform[ed] the debate from a discussion of white oppression to a discussion of black deficiency ... that was fundamentally racial, though to respectable white audiences it disavowed any association with the old style of white supremacy.”<sup>15</sup>

Helms’s perspective was undoubtedly racist. On *Viewpoint*, he cited instances of white crimes without holding all whites accountable and white welfare abuse without implications that whites were, by nature or culture, more inclined to laziness than other races.<sup>16</sup> He was not nearly as gracious, to say the least, to blacks. However, by framing his bigotry in the language of individualism, Helms portrayed himself as an objective voice of “calm consideration” in “an

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<sup>13</sup> *Viewpoint* #1180 (September 6, 1965), 2.

<sup>14</sup> See *Viewpoints* #1083 (date unknown) and 1180 (September 6, 1965).

<sup>15</sup> Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 76.

<sup>16</sup> See *Viewpoints* #1215 (October 27, 1965) and 1133 (June 28, 1965). In #1133, the example of a white woman abusing welfare is particularly venomous because she had an illegitimate child by a married black man. In instances of Helms mentioning explicitly white welfare abuses, blacks are usually close to the situation, allowing (if not actively encouraging) the immorality involved.

atmosphere of emotionalism.”<sup>17</sup> He actively, frequently denied accusations of bigotry by insisting that he hated injustice towards African Americans just as much as anyone.<sup>18</sup> He just did not classify most complaints from civil rights leaders to be about injustice so much as a sense of entitlement. He best summarized his attitude toward the Civil Rights Movement in an April 1965 editorial: “purely from the standpoint of mass psychology, perhaps the most incredible aspect of the racial unrest in America is the double standard that separates Negro rights from Negro responsibility.”<sup>19</sup> As Helms saw it, African Americans suffered from a sense of entitlement enabled and encouraged by liberal politicians singing the praises of civil rights activists and buying votes through welfare programs.<sup>20</sup>

Black criminality was one of Helms’s major concerns. He understood black crime to be indicative of a racial culture, fostered by welfare, that “encourage[d] idleness” at the expense of responsibility.<sup>21</sup> Some editorials were just lists of black crimes to shock the audience with their senselessness. A March 1965 broadcast contained the story, among others, of

A Negro man [in Mississippi who] was stopped after a 100 mile-an-hour chase. He jumped out of his car, walked back to the police vehicle with a sawed-off shotgun. He poked it in the window of the patrol car and blew off the policeman’s head. Said the Negro: “He had no business stopping me.”<sup>22</sup>

Most often, Helms’s anecdotes of black crime featured rape and murder or, as in this example, the brutal rejection of legal authority. He believed that accusations of police brutality were really expressions of black desires to act without consequence.<sup>23</sup> His impact on his viewers’ perceptions

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<sup>17</sup> *Viewpoint #1061* (March 18, 1965), 1. See also *Viewpoints #1005* (December 29, 1964) and *#1064* (March 23, 1965).

<sup>18</sup> See *Viewpoints #1059* (March 16, 1965), *1096* (May 6, 1965), and *1218* (November 1, 1965).

<sup>19</sup> *Viewpoint #1083* (date unknown), 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. See also *Viewpoint #1061* (March 18, 1965).

<sup>21</sup> *Viewpoint #1061* (March 18, 1965), 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>23</sup> See *Viewpoints #1061* (March 18, 1965), *1086* (April 22, 1965), and *1152* (July 28, 1965).

of black crime was captured chillingly in a 1965 letter from Alva Porter of Fayetteville, read on air:

Nobody ever interviews the *white* people who are beaten, murdered, raped and robbed by *Negroes* [emphasis his]. We hear constantly of “police brutality” but nobody sheds a tear for the policemen who are killed by Negro thugs and hoodlums. They go on and on - the list of senseless, brutal outrages committed against white people. But evidently, for the privilege of being born white, we are to accept and forgive.<sup>24</sup>

Helms did not offer an analysis of Porter’s letter, closing instead with a simple “thank you.”<sup>25</sup>

Although he would often remark that not all African Americans should be held accountable for the crimes of others, Helms still claimed that the black community - and Americans in general - tolerated heinous crimes committed by blacks out of fear of ostracism or a desire for political gain.<sup>26</sup> Helms did not blame African Americans for crimes they did not personally commit, but he did accuse them of allowing others to act lawlessly and irresponsibly while demanding a better collective reputation.

In instances where African Americans did not actually break laws, Helms still accused them of mass immorality. This immorality usually took the form of sexual promiscuity. Helms asked Martin Luther King Jr. multiple times to deny claims that civil rights marches and protests often devolved into “Negroes and whites participating ... in sex orgies of the rawest sort.”<sup>27</sup> The explicit mention of whites in sexual anecdotes is important: Helms never openly expressed fears about race-mixing, but he did paint African Americans as bad sexual influences upon whites.<sup>28</sup> For instance, Helms demonstrated the alleged sexual and moral corruption of whites by blacks by repeating the example of Fannie Long, a white woman from Texas who protested attacks on

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<sup>24</sup> *Viewpoint #1137* (July 2, 1965), 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Viewpoint #1061* (March 18, 1965), 1-2.

<sup>27</sup> *Viewpoint #1071* (April 1, 1965), 2.

<sup>28</sup> See *Viewpoints #1071* (April 1, 1965) and *1133* (June 28, 1965).

welfare and had an illegitimate child by a married black man.<sup>29</sup> Adultery and fornication were not the only sexual indiscretions Helms pointed out. He lambasted Bayard Rustin, a leader of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, for his open homosexuality and took his prominence in the Civil Rights Movement as evidence of black tolerance for sexual crimes.<sup>30</sup> Overall, Helms painted civil rights leaders as hedonists rather than activists.

For all of Helms's hatred of the Civil Rights Movement, he stood firm that his criticisms were not founded in any sort of racism. He acknowledged the *existence* of racial discrimination but disagreed with liberals on its source and scope. While civil rights activists viewed racism as a widespread, institutional force that unfairly affected all African Americans, Helms believed that prejudiced individuals were to blame for breaches of black rights. In response to the march from Selma to Montgomery for voting rights on March 7, 1965 and Johnson's promotion of the Voting Rights Act, Helms decried "foolish laws used by foolish men to deny Negroes their right to vote." He stated that "all Americans with decent sensibilities share President Johnson's stated desire to rid our land of illegal discrimination and denial of constitutional rights" and then dismissed the activists in Selma by claiming that local registrars had been "genuinely trying to register all qualified Negro voters who have presented themselves in reasonable fashion."<sup>31</sup>

Consistently, Helms's concern was whether or not blacks responded "reasonably" to racist obstacles like Alabama's literacy tests for voting. Since he could not deny the obvious existence of racism in the Jim Crow South, he called out both racism and protests against it as wrong: "For whatever it is worth, we think no more of those who would deprive a Negro of his rights than we do of Negroes who invade the rights of others under the pretense of what they call

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<sup>29</sup> See *Viewpoints* #1132 (June 25, 1965) and 1133 (June 28, 1965).

<sup>30</sup> *Viewpoint* #1071 (April 1, 1965), 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Viewpoint* #1059, 1.

a ‘non-violent movement.’”<sup>32</sup> Helms’s false equivalence of white racism and black frustration, however logically flawed, granted him a degree of plausible deniability of his own bigotry.

To further demonstrate that his qualms were solely with immoral African Americans as opposed to the entire race, Helms frequently lauded black individuals whom he considered to be upstanding members of their communities. The most intriguing example of Helms’s tokenism was from a June 1965 editorial describing an unnamed “old friend” of the station. He opened with a romanticized, pastoral description of North Carolina summers complete with imagery of the state bird, the cardinal. Blending into the summer scenery was his “old friend,” a landscaper. According to Helms, “his shirt was a great blot of perspiration, his shoulders just slightly stooped; the brim of his ancient straw hat seemed to recite the ups and downs of his life.” He smiled at everyone, took pride in working the land, and refused to collect welfare for fear that he “might get used to it.” Helms then made the big reveal: “our friend is a Negro.”<sup>33</sup>

This particular editorial had more imagery than any other from Helms’s time at WRAL. Although the point of this broadcast was to praise the friend as an underappreciated pillar of the community, he was tellingly described as part of the landscape, like the cardinals decorating the summer. The friend was a happy, respectable African American. He was also serving a white neighborhood in a quasi-agricultural role with pride and a smile for Helms as he passed by. This scene and character, cartoonishly romanticized and caricatured, reads more like a clip from *Song of the South* than a political editorial. The editorial closed with the neighborhood collecting donations for the friend to help pay off his wife’s medical expenses - an example of aid given willingly and happily to a deserving recipient, with no government involved. The friend was the

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<sup>32</sup> *Viewpoint* #1218 (November 1, 1965), 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Viewpoint* #1131 (June 24, 1965), 1-2.



opposite of everything Helms hated about other African Americans: he refused welfare, worked hard, smiled for white passersby, and earned - rather than demanded - the respect of his community. He was Helms's ideal black man.<sup>34</sup>

This story exemplifies a crucial distinction between liberal and conservative notions of how progress should be achieved in 1960s America. Helms's "old friend" did not protest or demand anything from his community. He was beloved by his neighborhood - including the racist Helms - because of his visibly warm and hard-working nature. He won over Helms's heart and the hearts of other whites one by one. This model for overcoming white racist attitudes was both highly individualized and evangelical in nature. The foundations of Helms's rationale for private charity over public welfare can be traced back to the American evangelical Christian tradition and the "Great Reversal" of the early 20th century. As religious historian George M. Marsden explains, American evangelicals largely shifted from advocating for "political means to promote the welfare of society, especially of the poor and the oppressed" to "reliance on private charity to meet such needs."<sup>35</sup> Historians and theologians have often misunderstood this shift as an abandonment of evangelical social concern when it is more accurately described as a change in *expression* of social concern.<sup>36</sup> Helms extended this logic of private charity to the Civil Rights Movement: rather than anything demanding anything from him, he should decide privately and individually how best to help others. Helms would not accept a movement that told him to confront his racism, but he would laud an individual black man as a pillar of society.

Tokenism aside, Helms's simultaneous affection for this man and hatred of the social movement meant to improve his friend's lot in life reveal the extent to which liberals believed in

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<sup>34</sup> *Viewpoint #1131*, 1-2.

<sup>35</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 86.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

a top-down approach to social change as opposed to the conservative grassroots approach. The Civil Rights Movement often strove for federal intervention in community issues, from the integration of public schools in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) to the oversight of election administration in the Voting Rights Act (1965). Conservatives like Helms detested this model of progress. Helms did not want orders from outside powers, but to evaluate situations for himself and his community. As he put it, “Conservatives are, as a general rule, individualists and not given to blind participation in games of follow-the-leader. They want to make their own personal decisions, and they want to make their own way. And they expect others to do the same.”<sup>37</sup> In his mind, social change had to emerge from individual action, like his friend winning people over as opposed to activists marching to demand legislated morality. Civil rights leaders taking the top-down approach, according to Helms, were merely “fan[ning] the flames of disorder, claiming that progress is being made.”<sup>38</sup>

Helms found the tactics of the Civil Rights Movement to be as disorderly as the overall strategy. Civil disobedience, the primary tactic encouraged by Martin Luther King Jr., was the practice of purposefully - though, ideally, nonviolently - breaking laws that one considers to be unjust. This practice was predicated on the notion that citizens are not obligated to adhere to arbitrary or discriminatory laws. Sit-ins were one of the most legendary acts of civil disobedience in American history, and the repeated refusal of protesters to adhere to the unjust practice of racial segregation ultimately resulted in the integration of southern businesses. Although Helms was not often vocal on the issue of segregation, he frequently attacked King for

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<sup>37</sup> *Viewpoint #1127* (June 18, 1965), 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

the rationale behind civil disobedience.<sup>39</sup> In a December 1960 editorial on King and the sit-in movement, Helms expressed horror at King's repeated claim that "a bad law is no law at all," and asserted that "Mr. King apparently believes he has the right to pick and choose which laws he wants to obey. Reverend King should be the first to remember that when a few citizens have that choice - then everybody has it."<sup>40</sup>

Helms continued to ask who gets to decide which laws may be ignored and which ones must be followed, and he never received an answer that satisfied him. Helms was outraged when Kemp D. Battle, former president of the North Carolina Bar Association, defended civil disobedience to the State Bar in 1965 by saying that "a law valid on its face becomes invalid in fact, if it is administered with obvious discrimination [and] its defiance by those willing to accept the risk is right."<sup>41</sup> To Helms, this defense of civil disobedience had a logical conclusion that liberals would not - or could not - recognize:

Who is to define "obvious discrimination"? ... Certainly the Ku Klux Klan must hold the view that federal civil rights legislation has been discriminatory against the white race ... Would Mr. Battle condone defiance of the law by the Ku Klux Klan? ... What this country needs is not men who will sugarcoat lawlessness, but leaders who will encourage men of all races to realize that anarchy is a poor way to preserve freedom.<sup>42</sup>

Helms saw no way to justify the purposeful rejection of the law by some groups but not all, and neither King nor Battle nor any other supporter of the Civil Rights Movement ever explained the difference between sitting at a lunch counter and lynching in a manner that he found compelling.

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<sup>39</sup> See *Viewpoint #7* (November 30, 1960) for an example of Helms discussing segregation in the context of the sit-in movement. Rather than defending racial segregation in and of itself, he preferred to frame the issue in terms of property rights of business owners. In terms of segregated public spaces, he criticized federal intervention in state matters.

<sup>40</sup> *Viewpoint #7* (November 30, 1960), 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Viewpoint #1218* (November 1, 1965), 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

To an extent, liberals rationalized that the distinction between civil disobedience and lawlessness laid in nonviolence, which Helms considered preposterous. A prominent example of this disagreement between liberals and Helms over the nonviolence of civil rights activists was the events, and Helms's reaction to, "Bloody Sunday." In order to protest discriminatory voting laws in Alabama, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) assembled roughly 600 protesters to march from Selma to Montgomery on March 7, 1965. Law enforcement officers, led by Maj. John Cloud, ordered the marchers to halt on the Edmund Pettus Bridge outside of Selma. When the marchers attempted to push onward, the police set off tear gas and brutally attacked them with clubs and whips. Film clips and photographs from "Bloody Sunday" shocked the nation, and the march to Montgomery was completed roughly two weeks later after receiving permission from Federal District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr.<sup>43</sup>

Although the events of Bloody Sunday were undoubtedly and horrifically violent, liberals and Helms differed in their interpretations of the events. Liberals viewed the violence as police brutality against activists who were rightfully demonstrating their frustration with unjust laws. In their view, the marchers were victims rather than instigators.<sup>44</sup> Helms, on the other hand, remarked that "King repeatedly refers to his 'non-violent movement.' It is about as non-violent as the Marines landing on Iwo Jima, and it is a 'movement' only in the sense that mob action is moving and spreading throughout the land."<sup>45</sup> In his eyes, the marchers had "provoke[d] violence

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<sup>43</sup> Byrne, "Bloody Sunday."

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> *Viewpoint #1056* (March 11, 1965), 1.

in a time and at a place where tempers [were] short,” and as such were the instigators rather than victims.<sup>46</sup>

King defended civil disobedience as “moral, peaceful, and ... loving assertions of human rights.” Helms, by contrast, saw immorality, violence, and hatred committed by civil rights activists and, as he alleged, ignored by the media and President Johnson.<sup>47</sup> For instance, he criticized Johnson’s vocal grief for fallen civil rights activists by telling a much different story:

Last week, an Alabama Negro died after having been horribly beaten and mutilated. The Negro’s tongue was cut out, it is said, because of the old man’s objections to civil rights marches. The silence from Washington was deafening ... when an innocent young Georgia boy, who had just enlisted in the Marine Corps, was shot dead ... by civil rights participants.<sup>48</sup>

This was not a picture of a loving movement dedicated to human dignity. To Helms, the Civil Rights Movement was a mob seeking to twist the law in its favor, and silence anyone who stood in its way.

Helms was not alone in this perspective: many conservatives voiced their opposition to the Civil Rights Movement by accusing activists of detesting the rule of law. Political philosopher and *National Review* contributor Frank Meyer, for instance, stated the following in a 1968 “Principles and Heresies” column on the upcoming Poor People’s Campaign:

Dr. King ... still wears the fig-leaf of non-violence, if somewhat rakishly askew. But if there were any doubts as to his insurrectionary intentions against constitutional government, his program for 1968 dispels them once and for all. What Dr. King has done, after three years of mounting violence ... is to announce the organization this spring in Washington of a massive campaign of civil disobedience, that is, an effort to bring the functioning of the government to a stop until Dr. King’s ideological program has enacted, in his words, “massive dislocation” of the capital “until America responds.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Viewpoint* #7 (November 30, 1960), 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Viewpoint* #1176 (August 31, 1965), 2.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Hart, *The Making of the Conservative Mind*, 177-178.

Likewise, Helms commented on the Poor People's Campaign: "the Negroes of America plan to take to the streets ... 'Our nation,' the Reverend Doctor King threatened in - what does he call it? - his non-violent way, 'will sink deeper and deeper into the tragic valley of chaos.'"<sup>50</sup> Both commentators quoted King's statements defending civil disobedience as evidence of his disregard for law and order. To movement conservatives like Helms and writers at *National Review*, the language of civil rights activism was often damning enough in and of itself.<sup>51</sup>

Helms rejected a tradition of civil disobedience as old as the Republic. When Martin Luther King Jr. compared the Civil Rights Movement to the Boston Tea Party, Helms stated:

There isn't the remotest comparison. The Negroes of America, regardless of the merits of some of their complaints, have recourse through exceedingly sympathetic courts to settle their grievances. They have a President whose ear is constantly cocked to the frequent reminders by civil rights leaders that he received 94 per cent [sic] of the Negro vote in 1964. They have a Congress which would tomorrow morning enact Webster's Dictionary into law if someone accidentally threw it into the hopper with a civil rights label. And the Supreme Court would stand in applause.<sup>52</sup>

Civil rights activists claimed the classical liberal right to revolt against an unjust government, but Helms claimed that they had not only a government willing to listen, but a government bent to their will. They could not be justified in both allegedly controlling the government and disobeying the law at the same time.

Overall, Helms viewed the black community as overly dependent on the government and charged that their movement's primary purpose was to demand comfort without the work required to achieve it. This perception of African Americans, though deeply bigoted, was grounded firmly in an understanding of American society as just enough to reward responsibility and punish immorality. Despite the very real, sometimes crushing challenges faced by African

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<sup>50</sup> *Viewpoint* #1790 (February 20, 1968), 1.

<sup>51</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> *Viewpoint* #1071 (April 1, 1965), 1.

Americans in the Jim Crow South, Helms refused to entertain the notion that structural oppression was the cause of black hardships. He instead pointed to personal irresponsibility as the true root, reducing the Civil Rights Movement to a series of mobs lacking a valid purpose, philosophy, or strategy. Helms's perspective and language made him appealing to anxious whites without the blatant racism of George Wallace or the Ku Klux Klan. He was, after all, friends with his black landscaper.

## **II. From the Individual to the Collective**

Helms's denial of structural oppression and inequality made his rhetoric powerfully appealing to a white audience. He recognized that the national Democratic Party of the early 1960s had a critical weak point: race. Conservative southern whites were allied with urban African Americans, white liberals, and union laborers outside of the South. Helms agitated racial resentment to draw his compatriots out of this tenuous coalition and into the conservative fold.<sup>53</sup>

As he perceived shifts in socioeconomic and political power, Helms became increasingly convinced that middle-class whites were the true victims of injustice in the 1960s. Considering how nonsensical he found other claims of group oppression, Helms's beliefs in reverse-classism and racism may seem at odds with his otherwise highly individualistic philosophy. However, Helms's stalwart defense of middle-class whites was based on the same logic of personal responsibility. He argued that liberals in 1960s America sought to deny hard-working, moral Americans the fruits of their labor, and their control over the media and government left the personally responsible Everyman with no money and no voice. Helms did not stand idly by as an ever-expanding government sought to pick the pockets of his viewers to provide bums and

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<sup>53</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 9.

hoodlums with liquor. Rather, he built a brand around being the voice of reason in a time of chaos.

The question becomes, how does one build and sustain a political identity theoretically opposed to identity politics? Helms decried the use of group identities to shirk individual responsibility while constantly referring to his viewers as “the little man.” This term, ingenious in its ambiguity and singularity, was understood as the sympathetic viewer. “The little man” - hard-working, sensible, and jealous of his rights - tuned into WRAL to hear the one voice that spoke for *him*. “The little man” was conservative, of course. Over time, he became a Republican.



### Chapter 3: A Not-so-Great Society

*Helms on Morality During the War on Poverty*

Give a man a reason, or an excuse, for not working, and then *pay* him for not working, and human nature will often cause him to sit back and -- not work! Then tell him that he is oppressed, that “society is to blame,” and he believes it. Then along comes an agitator, crying: “Burn, baby, burn!” And that, as the republic should now realize, is the way riots are bred -- and nations are destroyed.

- Jesse Helms, *Viewpoint #1796* (February 28, 1968)

The hate mail laid piled on the conference table. Handwritten, typed, scrawled in anger - the letters' barbs varied, but their complaint was mostly the same. The previous Saturday - May 30, 1964 - WRAL-TV had covered the North Carolina gubernatorial campaign. Once more, they had incited liberal rage. Reporters noted that in the Democratic primary, progressive candidate L. Richardson Preyer had more African-American supporters than moderate Dan Moore and segregationist I. Beverly Lake. That was a fact, and yet, angry letters flooded the station and the FCC breathed down management's neck. Several liberals complained that their coverage of the primary was “handled poorly and extremely biased,” and had contacted the FCC as a result.<sup>1</sup> The real issue, Helms knew, was that WRAL had dared to share facts that liberals “very much preferred that the public not [know].” If that bothered the FCC, he would gladly be the most bothersome man on television.<sup>2</sup>

In Helms's view, liberals used the FCC to prevent broadcasters from revealing their plot to the average American. Liberal domination of national politics did not result naturally from the democratic process, he contended, but was artificially manufactured

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<sup>1</sup> *Viewpoint #875* (June 5, 1964), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Viewpoint #870* (June 1, 1964), 2.

through policy and propaganda. By controlling the media, liberals convinced the “little man” that they served his interests. This deception then allowed liberals to tax the “little man” more and more to buy black votes through welfare programs. Helms knew, however, that the average white North Carolinian had no interest in expanding the rights of African Americans, especially if African Americans thought they had a right to other people’s money. He thus defended WRAL-TV’s report that more black voters in North Carolina supported Preyer than Lake or Moore. As he criticized those who had reported WRAL to the FCC, Helms asserted that “the American Negro has, by plan and design, become an important political force. Thus ... Negro reaction to issues and candidates is significant news, worthy of attention.”<sup>3</sup> The African-American reaction to issues, Helms reasoned, should be the opposite of the white reaction because the two groups had different interests: white voters wanted to keep their hard-earned money, and black voters wanted to take it from them.

Over the course of eleven years on *Viewpoint*, Helms crafted a compelling conspiracy theory of liberal manipulation. The logic was simple: liberals wanted political control and the African American community wanted special treatment. The plot, perhaps formed in a dark, smoke-filled room somewhere in Washington, was to buy black votes with taxpayer money. Those funds, stolen from the hard-working to prop up the lazy and immoral, would be called “welfare,” and the government would be generous enough with the money to convince white voters that the program was beneficial to them as well. As white Americans voted Democrat and unknowingly gave their earnings away to African

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1.

Americans, the President and Martin Luther King Jr. raised a toast to a job well-done and a people led astray.<sup>4</sup>

Other conservative journalists derided the FCC as a liberal gag on conservative media, but Helms's criticisms of the FCC and the liberal establishment were often racially charged in a way that others were not. Conservative media activists from outside the South did not place the blame for liberal policies on African Americans nearly as readily as Helms, who portrayed the liberal conspiracy as the disastrous combination of black immorality and political ambition. Clarence Manion, for instance, made the broad claim that the FCC and its Fairness Doctrine were "a dangerous blackout of the freedom of speech."<sup>5</sup> Helms specifically claimed that the FCC was dangerous because it concealed the power, violence, and immorality of African Americans.<sup>6</sup> Helms's association of African Americans with greed, media control, and welfare abuse encouraged his white audience to distrust the "liberal" media and anti-poverty programs, pulling them away from the Democratic Party as it grew increasingly liberal under President Johnson.

## **I. Declaring War**

Lyndon Baines Johnson assumed the presidency in 1963 with an impressive amount of confidence for someone who had not been elected to the office directly. Following President Kennedy's assassination in Dallas on November 22, Vice President Johnson was sworn in to replace him in one of the most tumultuous periods of American history.<sup>7</sup> Despite the tragedy that triggered his inauguration, Johnson quickly demonstrated that he would not spend 1964

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<sup>4</sup> *Viewpoint #1061* (March 18, 1965), 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 125.

<sup>6</sup> *Viewpoint #884* (June 19, 1964), 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Lerner, *A Companion to Lyndon B. Johnson*, 1-2.

mournfully lingering in Kennedy's shadow. Stepping up to the podium to deliver his first State of the Union Address, Johnson urged Congress to "make this year's session the best in the Nation's history" by improving transportation and health, expanding civil rights, and declaring "all-out war on human poverty and unemployment in these United States."<sup>8</sup>

Promising campaigns at the regional level motivated Johnson to make fighting poverty a national priority, but Americans were torn about his "war" from the start. Cynics doubted the ability of Johnson's community action programs to revitalize impoverished communities and dismantle the "culture of poverty" that theoretically encouraged hopelessness and helplessness among the poor.<sup>9</sup> Criticisms flew from both sides of the political spectrum as conservatives insisted that welfare programs used too much taxpayer money and liberals pushed the Johnson administration to invest more into anti-poverty initiatives, lest the "war against poverty" be a "merely a BB shot against poverty" instead.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of ideological battles, the War on Poverty was not a total defeat. In addition to community action programs, Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 established crucial economic resources such as work study funding for low-income college students and the Job Corps for youth career training.<sup>11</sup> In 1965, expansions to Social Security laid the basis for Medicare and Medicaid, improving healthcare coverage for elderly and low-income citizens.<sup>12</sup> In spite of these major successes, however, the War on Poverty proved unpopular, and the conservative movement gained momentum as frustrations with the Johnson administration's

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," 1964.

<sup>9</sup> "The War Against Poverty," *New York Times*, July 15, 1965 and Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> "The Economy on the Brink," *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 1967 and "The War Against Poverty," *New York Times*, July 15, 1965.

<sup>11</sup> "Part A - Job Corps" and "Part C - Work Study," *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*.

<sup>12</sup> "Medicare & Medicaid Milestones, 1937-2015."

inability to fix centuries of racial and socioeconomic oppression mounted.<sup>13</sup> After all, one cannot fight a war without an enemy, and conservatives vowed to fight Johnson and liberalism to the bitter end.

## **II. The Morality and Color of Poverty**

In North Carolina, ground zero of the War on Poverty, Helms continued to use media as a powerful weapon for conservatism. Governor Terry Sanford's North Carolina Fund provided the template for Johnson's federal anti-poverty programs by emphasizing community development and encouraging cross-racial cooperation, but the Fund was a 5-year program that had only started in 1963.<sup>14</sup> The North Carolina Fund was only in its infancy when Johnson thrust Southern poverty and efforts to combat it into the national spotlight. Rather than drawing inspiration from student volunteers working to dismantle structural socioeconomic oppression, many Americans interpreted anti-poverty programs as a political maneuver to votes for Johnson in the 1964 election.<sup>15</sup> This cynicism towards the War on Poverty emanated from North Carolinian distrust of the North Carolina Fund -- a distrust fostered by Helms.<sup>16</sup>

Though Helms was not from an exceptionally privileged economic background, he had little sympathy for the poor. From Helms's perspective, socioeconomic inequality stemmed solely from individual, rather than structural, limitations. Economic survival was to be earned rather than granted or guaranteed. Like other anti-communist, libertarian conservatives, the bedrock of Helms's philosophy was the supremacy of property rights above all else.<sup>17</sup> Labor and

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<sup>13</sup> Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-8.

<sup>15</sup> "Poverty War Assailed As a Plan to Get Votes," *New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1964 and "Small War on Poverty," *New York Times*, March 25, 1964.

<sup>16</sup> Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 301.

<sup>17</sup> Young, *Reconsidering American Liberalism*, 6.

rewards went hand-in-hand, and one should be able to enjoy - and control - the fruits of one's labor. Because Helms's worldview depended so heavily upon individual worthiness, he viewed the poor as victims of their own immorality rather than circumstance. He argued vehemently against anti-poverty programs long before Johnson came into office, and was deeply alarmed by the President's 1964 declaration of war on poverty. Rather than eliciting hope, Johnson's message made Helms feel like "a condemned man being led up the steps of the scaffold."<sup>18</sup>

When Helms was feeling generous towards Johnson, he portrayed the War on Poverty as a well-intentioned but fundamentally misguided set of programs seeking to solve a problem that Johnson did not understand. Soon after Johnson declared his "war," Helms asserted that "nobody -- from the President on down -- has been very clear even in defining the nature of the enemy. Poverty is a relative thing and, whether we like to admit it or not, largely an individual problem."

<sup>19</sup> He insisted that the government "might better know where to begin" combating poverty if it would draw "a line ... between poverty and irresponsibility."<sup>20</sup> As the adage goes, you cannot legislate morality, and poverty was ultimately a moral rather than societal failure from Helms's perspective.<sup>21</sup>

The assumption that work ethic directly correlated with prosperity, however, did not account for obvious socioeconomic disparities that one could not control, such as being born into poverty. Helms was not blind to this, and in a diagnosis of the national problems of 1965, he stated that "equality of opportunity is a perfectly legitimate and desirable aspiration. No man worth his salt is without it. But the popular theory of today ... of equality of rewards in complete

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<sup>18</sup> *Viewpoint* #769 (January 9, 1964), 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Viewpoint* #821 (March 24, 1964), 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Viewpoint* #1796 (February 28, 1968), 2.

disregard of contributions to society is a senseless delusion.”<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Helms painted equality of opportunity not as a *guarantee*, but as a *goal* - a crucial goal, but a goal nonetheless. Helms’s concession that equality of opportunity was not necessarily a reality in American society may have helped to shield him from accusations of willful ignorance of the hardships that many faced.

Helms did not pretend that everyone started on the same footing, but nevertheless blamed those who could not overcome socioeconomic obstacles for their continued misfortune. It was not his fault if someone was born poor, and it was certainly not his responsibility to dig someone out of poverty if they were not determined and resourceful enough to accomplish that themselves. The same logic applied to those born into wealth - inherited fortune required individual responsibility, lest the advantage be squandered. A responsible person would prosper regardless of circumstance and an irresponsible person would suffer. Although equality of opportunity did not exist in 1960s America, Helms’s philosophy stated that individuals were still responsible for their own fates.

As a result, Helms criticized governmental attempts to help Americans out of poverty for being generally well-meaning but doomed to fail. Poverty, as he perceived it, was a direct result of irresponsibility, whether in the form of refusing to work or wasting earnings.<sup>23</sup> Welfare programs were thus attempting to solve the wrong problem: they addressed the lack of *money* rather than the lack of *productivity*. Giving money to the poor would only encourage irresponsible behavior - why work for a living when the government would prop you up?<sup>24</sup> He insisted that what the poor really needed was “an understanding of the virtue of thrift ... and a

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<sup>22</sup> *Viewpoint #1127* (June 18, 1965), 1.

<sup>23</sup> See *Viewpoints #1055* (March 10, 1965) and 23 (December 22, 1960).

<sup>24</sup> *Viewpoint #1061* (March 18, 1965), 2.

lesson in personal responsibility.”<sup>25</sup> This claim was practical, not callous, from his perspective. When a viewer wrote to Helms in December 1960 that his emphasis on individualism discouraged compassion, Helms responded that the viewer had simply fallen for the “fable of federal aid” in which “private property [is confiscated] from the productive to give to the unproductive.”<sup>26</sup>

Helms frequently cited cases of welfare abuse as evidence of poor people’s immorality and liberals’ misunderstanding of human nature. This strategy, infamously practiced by President Reagan in the 1980s through his descriptions of “welfare queens,” portrayed the misuse and manipulation of welfare as the norm.<sup>27</sup> Helms defined misuse of welfare funds to be any purchases that he considered unnecessary for survival, which he made clear in a March 1961 editorial lambasting welfare recipients in Mecklenburg County:

The *Charlotte Observer*, in a series of revealing articles on the welfare problem in Mecklenburg County, reports that 60 per cent [sic] of the families on welfare in that county have television sets, telephones and other items that generally may be regarded as luxuries ... [as well as] the ultimate in the abuse of the welfare program: one family receiving regular welfare checks recently had a pink telephone installed.<sup>28</sup>

While the “luxuries” mentioned could have economic value for those in need - a telephone could be used to contact employers, for instance - it is unclear whether such possibilities occurred to or mattered to Helms. This is perhaps due to his firm belief that the poor were not actively seeking to escape poverty. In fact, he claimed that welfare was a motivation *not* to do so.<sup>29</sup> Many, if not most, welfare recipients “*could* get work if they didn’t prefer welfare payments to a job.”<sup>30</sup> In his

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<sup>25</sup> *Viewpoint* #23 (December 22, 1960), 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Viewpoint* #12 (December 7, 1960), 2.

<sup>27</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> *Viewpoint* #12 (March 16, 1961), 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Viewpoint* #1061 (March 18, 1965), 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Viewpoint* #12 (December 7, 1960), 2.



perspective, the poor were talented swindlers looking for someone else to foot the bill for pink telephones.

Since Helms held that welfare programs were misguided infringements on the property rights of the responsible for the benefit of the irresponsible, he considered the negligent implementation of welfare policies to add insult to injury. He was enraged by the fact that Americans were taxed to fund public welfare programs while there seemed to be very little supervision of welfare recipients to ensure that those funds, forcibly taken from others, were being used morally and responsibly. In Helms's view, if welfare programs must exist, there should at least be extensive oversight of how welfare recipients spent their money.<sup>31</sup>

Jaded welfare officials were also useful for proving Helms's point about the counterproductivity of the programs. An anonymous viewer who worked at an unspecified county welfare department wrote to WRAL in 1965 to apologize for an earlier letter she had sent that disagreed with Helms's stances on welfare and to explain how she had come to agree with him. Helms shared the following quotation from her letter on air:

The truly needy and deserving are being deprived of much help that could be given to them because of the cost of giving aid to people who are able to work and could get jobs if they would take them. I believe that most people in my line of work realize this. But they are afraid to open their mouths. And even if they did they have no choice but to follow the rules.<sup>32</sup>

The woman went on to lament the flagrant abuse of the welfare system by mothers bearing multiple illegitimate babies in order to collect bigger checks to spend on liquor. Helms praised the anonymous viewer for her kindness in writing the letters and questioned whether "humanitarianism" could be helpful "if it takes leave of common sense."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Viewpoint* #81 (March 16, 1961), 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Viewpoint* #1055 (March 10, 1965), 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

Considering Helms's target audience was primarily working-class whites in eastern North Carolina, an economically depressed region and major focal point of anti-poverty efforts, his portrayals of the poor as lazy and entitled should have provoked outrage. However, Helms's references to poverty blamed African Americans for his audience's struggles. Helms frequently cited the high unemployment rate and shortage of farm workers in the region as evidence that North Carolina had plenty of work, but no one willing to do it.<sup>34</sup> Hired farm labor in North Carolina at that time was disproportionately associated with African Americans - according to the 1960 census, 31,592 farm laborers in North Carolina were nonwhite men versus 22,076 white men.<sup>35</sup> By highlighting underemployment in farm work specifically, Helms implied to his audience that African Americans would rather pick up welfare checks than tobacco.

Helms's racialization of poverty struck a chord. Piedmont and eastern North Carolina, known nationally for its textile and tobacco industries, had also garnered attention for having the highest concentration of Ku Klux Klan chapters, or "klaverns," in the nation.<sup>36</sup> The Tar Heel State had a reputation for being a beacon of Southern progressivism, but as sociologist David Cunningham demonstrates in *Klansville, USA*, North Carolina's veneer of racial tolerance merely pushed white resentment underground rather than eliminating it. Unlike in Mississippi, for instance, white supremacist organizations such as the White Citizens' Council were not sanctioned or incorporated into state or local government in North Carolina.<sup>37</sup> White supremacy and racial resentment, however, remained powerful, especially in areas with higher

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<sup>34</sup> *Viewpoint* #812 (March 11, 1964), 1-2.

<sup>35</sup> "Table 58: Occupation Group of Employed Persons, By Color and Sex, For the State, Urban and Rural," 1960 US Census.

<sup>36</sup> Cunningham, *Klansville, USA*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

concentrations of African Americans. Eastern NC was thus fertile ground for the Klan as the most heavily black region of a state with comparatively few release valves for racial tension.<sup>38</sup>

Though Helms never adopted the blatantly racist vocabulary of figures like Strom Thurmond or George Wallace, he wove white supremacy into his editorials in more subtle ways. Helms argued that antipoverty programs fostered a sense of entitlement within welfare recipients, who then demanded more and more from the government through marches and mob violence.<sup>39</sup> In the mid-1960s, the reference to civil rights demonstrations was abundantly clear. The fact that many civil rights protests called for economic justice as well as political opportunities played perfectly into Helms's rhetoric. Through his lens, African Americans violently demanded that government provide rights and opportunities that white Americans had earned themselves. By capitalizing on resentment towards the Civil Rights Movement, he convinced whites that their earnings were being stolen by "unproductive," "irresponsible" African Americans. White voters in eastern North Carolina, previously pillars of the New Deal coalition, grew more economically conservative as they perceived blacks to be the beneficiaries - and abusers - of welfare programs.<sup>40</sup>

### **III. Living in the Line of Fire**

Conservative media was pushing through its growing pains in the mid-1960s. The hope of Goldwater's nomination and the painful blow of his defeat in 1964 taught conservative journalists a valuable political lesson: having *more* supporters usually beats having the *right* supporters. If conservatives wanted to take the White House, they would have to branch out from their devoted intellectual following and appeal to broader audiences. As Clarence Manion

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 74, 100-101.

<sup>39</sup> *Viewpoint* #1796 (February 28, 1968), 2.

<sup>40</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 9, 47 and Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 293.

lamented in a 1965 Forum pamphlet, “we know ... that once Mr. Average American gets a chance to find out what is happening to his country, he becomes a dedicated Conservative.”<sup>41</sup>

Now that conservative media had an appreciable presence in American discourse, conservative journalists had to broaden their appeal to “Mr. Average American.”

With that realization, conservative media activists braved the new frontier of television. As with any American frontier, the territory had long since been occupied - in the case of American television, liberals had controlled broadcast news since its inception. Edward R. Murrow, a North Carolina native and war correspondent during World War II, pioneered newscasting with the weekly program *See It Now* on CBS.<sup>42</sup> Murrow set a newscasting standard that alienated conservatives. His most famous *See It Now* broadcast was a 1954 expose of Senator Joseph McCarthy that contributed to the anticommunist crusader’s downfall.<sup>43</sup>

By 1966, conservative journalists had gained enough clout to begin edging into the national television arena. Buckley’s *Firing Line*, on PBS from 1966 to 1999, was by far the most successful program. It became the longest-running political television show with a single host. Buckley’s distinctive transatlantic accent and witty demeanor made him instantly iconic. He even made the cover of *Time* in November 1967, which highlighted his tendency to hold a pen near his mouth. The magazine’s headline, “Conservatism Can Be Fun,” marked both Buckley’s particular charm and a massive shift in the public opinion of conservatism.<sup>44</sup> Bill Buckley, the “popular polemicist,” broke ground for nationally-syndicated conservative television.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 188.

<sup>42</sup> Bob Edwards, *Edward R. Murrow*, 108.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>44</sup> “William Buckley: Conservatism Can Be Fun,” *Time*, Nov. 3, 1967.

<sup>45</sup> “The Sniper,” *Time*, November 3, 1967.

Unfortunately for other conservative journalists, Buckley's spectacular success with *Firing Line* did not quite clear the obstacles for conservative newscasters. Manion briefly brought *Manion Forum* onto television screens on the West Coast and Midwest in the early 1960s, but was forced to shut down after only a few years when his only major sponsor withdrew his support.<sup>46</sup>

Efforts to create a conservative television network fared no better. In 1965, Texas businessman David Dye proposed purchasing a majority of shares in CBS in order to take over the network. Even if buying out a major national television network was financially plausible, and it certainly was not, such an undertaking would have been logistically difficult at best. Consequently, the plan died, and the idea of a conservative network was pushed to the back burner until the 1990s.<sup>47</sup>

At the regional level, Helms demonstrated that smaller-scale conservative television programs were more attainable than national airtime, but the FCC constantly haunted him. Helms's scathing indictments of liberal politicians, academics, and journalists were not universally appreciated, least of all by the targets themselves. The FCC formally investigated WRAL-TV twice for Fairness Doctrine violations, but Helms and Fletcher held their ground and used the vagueness of the policy to their advantage.<sup>48</sup> Since the Fairness Doctrine only mandated that broadcasters provide the *opportunity* for public figures to defend themselves as opposed to requiring the broadcasters to represent each figure sympathetically, Helms could follow the letter (if not the spirit) of the law by lambasting liberals and openly inviting them to respond.<sup>49</sup> This

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<sup>46</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 181.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 181-182.

<sup>48</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> See *Viewpoints* #781 (January 28, 1964) and #786 (February 4, 1964).

approach did not impress the FCC, but with no technical violations on the part of the network, *Viewpoint* survived.<sup>50</sup>

#### **IV. Conservative Media, Conservative Nation?**

For all of conservative media's shortcomings, they had shown in 1964 that they were a serious political movement that intended to take over the Republican Party. The more liberal wing of the party, often called Rockefeller Republicans after Goldwater's main competitor for the Republican presidential nomination, resented the encroachment of "extremists," but to ignore the Goldwater faction would be political suicide for anyone seeking the party's presidential nomination. Recovered from his 1960 defeat by Kennedy and eager to redeem himself in the 1968 election, the relatively moderate Richard M. Nixon pursued conservative media endorsement to secure the support of the Goldwater crowd.<sup>51</sup>

Nixon was far from the ideal conservative candidate, but he had several advantages over other presidential hopefuls in 1968. Like the Arizonan Goldwater, the California-born Nixon was from outside the South, which helped to distance him from associations with segregationists that worried many conservative media activists. This advantage to the movement's reputation, however, could also be Nixon's downfall in the election. Alabama Governor George Wallace, a vocal hardline segregationist, entered the race as a third-party candidate, tempting white southerners and conservatives unsatisfied with Nixon's ideological track record to divert their votes from Nixon, risking a Democratic victory.<sup>52</sup> Intellectually-inclined conservatives like

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<sup>50</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 104.

<sup>51</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 202-207.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

Buckley and Regnery wrote off Wallace as a dangerous demagogue who threatened conservative “respectability,” and most conservative journalists outside the South followed suit.<sup>53</sup>

The view from North Carolina was a bit different. Helms straddled several lines in his coverage of the 1968 campaign season - he deeply desired a conservative, Republican North Carolina, but his audience largely supported segregation. Luckily for Helms, North Carolina’s proclivity for racial “moderation” worked to his advantage by making it easier to write off Wallace without angering his white audience.<sup>54</sup> Helms ultimately endorsed Nixon while clinging to the hope that the Wallace campaign would push the moderate Republican further right.<sup>55</sup> The Nixon campaign and white resentment towards the War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement also provided an excellent opportunity for Republicans down the ticket in North Carolina. Besides Nixon, Helms threw his full support behind Republican Jim Gardner’s 1968 gubernatorial campaign against Democrat Robert W. Scott. Gardner was an avid supporter of *Viewpoint*, and made great strides in revitalizing the GOP in the Raleigh area in his 1964 and 1966 congressional elections against longtime Democratic incumbent Harold D. Cooley. Gardner’s near-victory in 1964 and landslide victory against Cooley in 1966 demonstrated the conservative movement’s influence in realigning North Carolina politics.<sup>56</sup> Even though Gardner lost the 1968 gubernatorial election to Scott, Helms pointed to the fact that he received more votes than Nixon, implying a stronger Republican tide than a down-ticket coattail effect could explain. Instead of merely preferring Nixon over Humphrey and voting straight-ticket, Helms argued, “the people [of North Carolina] are simply beginning to return to what they have

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<sup>53</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 208-209.

<sup>54</sup> Cunningham, *Klansville, USA*, 75-77.

<sup>55</sup> *Viewpoint* #1933 (September 24, 1968), 2.

<sup>56</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 97-105, 136.

subconsciously believed in all along.”<sup>57</sup> Nixon carried North Carolina - the first Republican presidential candidate to do so since 1928.<sup>58</sup> A Republican was going to the White House, and conservative journalists helped get him there.

Despite Nixon’s victory, conservative media activists floundered in the early 1970s.<sup>59</sup> Their role in getting Nixon to the White House validated the importance of the conservative movement, but the rhetorical strategies that most conservative journalists had used in defeat failed to translate in victory. Conservative media activists had characterized their movement as an oppressed, intellectual minority - a claim fundamentally undermined by their electoral victory. Hemmer argues that because conservative journalists were “only versed in the language of opposition, [they] failed to find a way to navigate conservative success.”<sup>60</sup> Soon after Nixon took office in 1968, *Human Events* and *National Review* were both in financial straits, and the *Manion Forum* went off the air entirely.<sup>61</sup> Conservatives could not frame themselves as the scrappy opposition when they were the ones in power, so their electoral success also marked the beginning of their media failure.

Helms also spoke “the language of opposition,” but refused to identify as a member of a political minority. Like other conservative journalists, he often lamented how liberal media had seduced the “little man” into thinking that liberal policies benefited him, but unlike conservative intellectuals, he held strong to the belief that a conservative majority would arise from the common folk.<sup>62</sup> Or, at the very least, if a conservative majority arose from the common folk,

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<sup>57</sup> *Viewpoint #1962* (November 6, 1968), 2.

<sup>58</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 173-174.

<sup>59</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 230.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-235, 250.

<sup>62</sup> *Viewpoint #1962* (November 6, 1968), 2.



conservative intellectuals feared the nature of that majority in a way that Helms did not. *National Review* shut out the Birchers and hardline segregationists because conservative intellectuals valued “responsible” conservatism over building a mass movement, whereas Helms managed to discourage “irresponsible” conservative groups without alienating their members from the movement as a whole.<sup>63</sup>

Helms’s insistence that the liberal minority was manipulating and oppressing the conservative majority firmly rooted his rhetoric in the language of populism. For instance, as the Democratic Party began to lose its footing in North Carolina, Helms mused that “the conservative majority of North Carolina’s people has been a long time getting together as a collective voice ... [due to the] false promises and cunning wedges driven amidst them [by liberals].” They had finally and rightfully claimed power from the liberal minority.<sup>64</sup> Helms’s strategy differed from that of other conservative journalists. He claimed the American everyman for conservatism while his national counterparts shunned the everyman and most attempts to bring him into the conservative fold. Simultaneously, Helms insisted that the average North Carolinian was conservative and actively sought to consolidate all classes of white North Carolinians into a unified conservative movement. While most white North Carolinians were conservative in some respect, they were not consistently economically and socially conservative across class lines. By weaving economic liberalism with racial liberalism, Helms managed to convince poor whites in eastern North Carolina that antipoverty programs hurt them and benefited African Americans, making economic conservatism attractive to a crucial pillar of the

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<sup>63</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 192-193 and Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 54.

<sup>64</sup> *Viewpoint* #890 (June 29, 1964), 1.

Democratic coalition. As a result, poor white North Carolinians left the increasingly liberal Democratic Party for the increasingly conservative GOP.

White rage in the late 1960s provided an ample opportunity for conservative journalists to adopt the populist strategy of southern Democrats, but conservatives outside the South continued to reject populism or fail to use it effectively. Some intellectuals like Buckley and Meyer stated outright that populism and conservatism were mutually exclusive.<sup>65</sup> Others, like Regnery and Manion, tried to tap into populist fervor but missed the mark by trying to work around overt racial politics.<sup>66</sup> As a native southerner from a state with a powerful history of populist politics, Helms had the political advantage of having fewer scruples with populism. The rhetoric that Helms developed to satisfy these contradictory desires maximized both populist appeal and intellectual respectability - to the extent that any campaign Helms ran could be deemed “respectable.” By 1972, national conservative media activists were still struggling to reach “Mr. Average American” while the “little men” that Helms had represented for eleven years at WRAL-TV carried him all the way to the Senate.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 208.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 245-247.

<sup>67</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 192-193.

**Conclusion: Fair News, Fox News, and Fake News**  
*Helms's Legacy in a "Post-Truth" America*

This station, having placed its hands to the plow, is not turning back. Looking to the future, we have the comfort of knowing that there are millions of our citizens who think as we think. We reflect also that, however worthy the cause, the Lord does not require you to win – only to do the best you can. The responsibility is His from then on out. We will continue to do the best we can for what we believe to be right...[and in] the best interests of you, our listeners, and of all the people.

- A.J. Fletcher, *Viewpoint #1000* (December 21, 1964)

We have polls today that show that conservatives outnumber liberals in every state in this country, and we have a poll showing that the Democratic Party approval is under 50%. This is a center-right country, so the path for the Republicans here is crystal clear: no deals, present free-market solutions, and reap the rewards ... The days of us being defensive and worrying about what the media and the precious moderates might say are over. Going on offense here is what has worked, and that's the huge lesson.

- Rush Limbaugh, *The Rush Limbaugh Show* (May 19, 2011)

In my final semester at UNC, I took a class on horror films. The crux of our class discussion of Jordan Peele's 2017 film *Get Out* was whether it should be classified as horror, thriller, or documentary. As we debated the differences, the professor grew increasingly annoyed.

"I'm not at all interested in categorizing this film, or any other film," he said. "I'm interested in how viewing the film as a horror or as a thriller or as a documentary changes our understanding of the film. What can we see about *Get Out* if we think of it as horror? Do we get different things from it if we think of it as a thriller? Stop thinking of genres as boxes and start thinking of them as lenses."

There are many reasons Jesse Helms may have come to my mind during a discussion of a racially charged film like *Get Out*, but it was my professor's comment about genre that struck me. For decades, historians like Nicole Hemmer have analyzed Helms as a politician, and that

lens colored their appraisal of his life and significance to North Carolina and the New Right. Bryan Hardin Thrift challenged the historiography on Helms by analyzing him as a journalist rather than as a politician. That lens allowed Thrift to see Helms's importance to the rise of conservative media in a way that viewing him as a politician did not. But, like *Get Out*, Helms does not fit neatly into one box. He must be understood as both a journalist and a politician if we are to understand his rhetorical and political strategies.

Using different lenses to analyze conservative journalists also allows us to understand how and why conservative media transformed after 1968. Soon after Nixon took office, conservative media activists managed to defeat their white whale: the FCC's Fairness Doctrine. Nixon, ever-anxious of losing power, was leery of journalists who criticized his administration. Conservative journalists had helped carry Nixon to the White House, and he was eager to amplify their voices.<sup>1</sup> The Nixon administration investigated the conservative claim that the FCC disproportionately punished conservative journalists and favored liberal viewpoints and found that, quantitatively, it was true.<sup>2</sup> Conservative media activists now had quantitative evidence of a liberal media bias, and that evidence led federal courts to overturn the Fairness Doctrine in *Red Lion vs. FCC* in 1969.<sup>3</sup> The FCC no longer loomed so large over conservative journalists, allowing future voices like Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and Fox News to make conservative media widely popular and accessible.

Despite their victory over the FCC, most conservative journalists did not flourish in the Nixon years. *National Review* lost money and subscribers hand over fist, and the long-running *Manion Forum* went off the air. For years, conservative media activists had portrayed

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<sup>1</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 218.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

conservatives as a minority oppressed by the liberal majority.<sup>4</sup> Hemmer refers to this strategy as “elite populism,” and it worked -- a relatively conservative president was in office and the Fairness Doctrine was no more. However, conservative claims to minority status ceased to be compelling when they became the electoral *majority*. The first generation of conservative journalists, finding their once successful rhetoric now ineffective, faltered.<sup>5</sup>

Buckley and Manion’s struggles, however, did not cause conservatism as a movement to struggle. Conservatives flourished when they claimed to be an oppressed *majority* -- just as Helms did on *Viewpoint*. Unlike his peers at the national level, Helms consistently told his viewers in North Carolina that they were the ideological majority, and a disproportionately powerful liberal minority was subjugating and deceiving them. Helms’s little-man populism portrayed conservative whites in North Carolina as the victim of liberal machinations to stay in power by taxing hard-working whites to buy black votes through welfare and “anti-poverty” programs. This strategy was successful across time and class lines in a way that elite populism was not.<sup>6</sup> Helms’s pairing of small government ideology and racial resentment appealed to upper- and working-class whites simultaneously, whereas the elite populism of *National Review* alienated the working class, often purposefully.<sup>7</sup>

After Nixon, other conservative journalists adopted the little-man populist style to maximize movement power. The most striking example was Baptist televangelist Jerry Falwell, founder of the “Moral Majority.”<sup>8</sup> Claiming to be the oppressed majority also allowed Helms and like-minded conservative journalists to continue accusing mainstream media of having a liberal

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<sup>4</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, xiv.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>6</sup> Thrift, *Conservative Bias*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 101.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

bias even after the Fairness Doctrine was lifted and liberal voices no longer dominated the air. Media, conservative media activists asserted, would always be biased, making openly ideological media more accurate and honest than media claiming to be objective. ‘Tis better to own one’s bias than deny it.<sup>9</sup>

By this logic, a new generation of conservative media activists emerged. While it is unclear if the second generation of conservative media activists were familiar with *Viewpoint*, their personalities and strategies certainly align much more with Helms than Buckley. Rush Limbaugh, for instance, assumed Clarence Manion’s mantle in 1988 by revitalizing conservative radio with *The Rush Limbaugh Show*. Limbaugh was a brash speaker who encouraged his audience to be vigilant of liberal, minority conspiracy. He also prioritized being emotionally provocative over being intellectually superior.<sup>10</sup> Limbaugh and the personalities on Fox News carried Helms’s legacy of little-man populism to living rooms across the country, decades after Helms left WRAL for the Senate.<sup>11</sup>

In the age of Donald Trump and “fake news,” the power of little-man populism paired with conservative media remains clear. Trump’s campaign and presidency have been more concerned with capitalizing upon the “little man’s” frustration than proving the intellectual merit of conservatism. Trump and his followers adopted a catchy term for journalists who criticized him: “fake news.”<sup>12</sup> The cries of “fake news” have reinvigorated the original conservative talking point of mainstream media being unreliable and liberal. And if mainstream media is both liberal and “fake,” conservative media is the only “real” option. Pro-Trump journalists, like Helms

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 260-270.

<sup>12</sup> “The Highly Anticipated 2017 Fake News Awards,” *GOP*, January 17, 2018.

fifty-some years earlier, claim that rather than being “extremely biased,” they are giving information to the American people that liberals “very much preferred that the public not [have].”<sup>13</sup>

Considering the echoes of Helms’s style in modern conservative media, it is odd that Helms is not widely remembered as a conservative media pioneer. Perhaps future historians will explore this topic further to determine if any second-generation conservative journalists watched or listened to Viewpoint. Such information could suggest Helms’s direct impact upon modern conservative rhetoric, which is not my purpose in this study. I cannot claim to know whether Helms inspired Falwell or Limbaugh, but of this I am certain: Helms’s approach to conservative media garnered a cross-cutting white following that carried him to the Senate, and his rhetorical strategy of little-man populism outlasted the elite populism of national conservative journalists.

Helms knew this strategy would work from his direct experience in the racial politics of the 1950s, which most other conservative journalists lacked. While there is little doubt that Buckley can be credited for building a conservative *intellectual* movement, figures like Helms demonstrate that local journalists and grassroots organizers were far more instrumental in turning conservatism into a powerful *political* movement. Conservative intellectuals provided a language to justify conservatism, and savvy politicians used that language on the ground to rally everyday citizens to conservative causes. Buckley made conservatism a force to be reckoned with, but Helms turned North Carolina red -- and today, the voices on Fox News sound much more like Helms than Buckley.

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<sup>13</sup> *Viewpoint* #875 (June 5, 1964), 1 and *Viewpoint* #870 (June 1, 1964), 2.

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