"A College for Politics":

Jesse Helms, the Congressional Club,

and the North Carolina Senate Election of 1990

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For most of Jesse Helms' thirty-year career in the United States Senate, his ability to win elections and exercise political power depended on the North Carolina Congressional Club. In 1973, not long after his first Senate campaign, Helms' chief political adviser, conservative Raleigh attorney Tom Ellis, created the organization in order to retire a $100,000 campaign debt. By 1980, "the Club" had emerged as a potent political force. Highly innovative, it pioneered the extensive polling, television advertising, and messaging that have today become characteristic of modern American political campaigns. The Club reached North Carolina voters through a sharply drawn conservative political message, and it was one of the first organizations to make use of issue ads defining their opponents. Taking advantage of direct-mail fundraising, the Club mobilized a national conservative constituency that paid for massive doses of television advertising during Helms' Senate campaigns. The Club also played an instumental role in modern electoral politics and in modern conservatism's triumph in the late twentieth century, and it reached zenith of power and prestige in Ronald Reagan's 1976 victory in the North Carolina primary and Helms' victory over Governor Jim Hunt in 1984.

By 1990, the Club had become a mature political organization, top-down in structure, and run according to a military-command model. Its general-in-chief was Tom Ellis, who was legendary for his ability to organize, raise money, focus a campaign message, use the media effectively, and, when necessary, mercilessly wage war against his political adversaries. Ellis first got to know Helms in the notorious 1950 North Carolina senatorial campaign, when both supported conservative candidate Willis Smith against southern liberal Frank Graham. Ellis ran as a political candidate only once—in

1956, when he lost a race for the state senate. Deeply ideological, Ellis was, like Helms, a committed segregationist; in 1958, he served as legal counsel to the Pearsall Committee, which devised North Carolina's attempt to resist compliance with the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Over the years, Ellis became Helms' conservative conscience—what Jesse would describe as "an unabashed conservative"—and when Helms encountered the realities of politics and governing, Ellis, as a true believer, was there to remind of him of conservative priorities. Ellis, recalled his longtime associate Carter Wrenn, "always had a pure heart, and he always tried to do what was right, even when it was wrong." An acute commentator, Charlie Black, described Ellis as possessing "the best political mind in North Carolina" and possessing "fantastic local knowledge and instinct for North Carolina politics."[1]

The Ellis-Helms relationship formed a key ingredient in Jesse's political success, but from the outset their political partnership had tensions. Much of it had to with ideological purity and Ellis' utter devotion to the conservative cause. He was a man whose political ideology possessed a "religious fervor" and even "religious fanaticism," according to Wrenn, and this meant not only purity and dedication but also, sometimes, ruthlessness and cruelty. "I play hardball," Ellis told one reporter, "because I think it's a hardball game." Ellis would lead many campaigns, observed Wrenn, which were "mentally and physically brutal." Helms, though himself also very ideological, was the more practical and politically sensitive of the two men, and occasionally willing to compromise principle to necessity. Their "mutual need for each other," observed Wrenn, "strapped them together," but the relationship remained contentious. According to Wrenn, the two men were constantly in conflict, with the conflict easing as elections

approached and accelerating after elections had occurred.[2] In campaigning, Ellis was usually the bad cop, Helms the good cop: Ellis would do whatever it took to win.[3]

Second in command was Carter Wrenn, who joined the organization in December 1974, at the recommendation of some of his UNC classmates who were involved in Young Republican politics. Charlie Black, who worked on the 1972 Helms campaign and then worked on his Senate staff, persuaded Ellis to hire Wrenn. Wrenn met Black as volunteer at the Helms campaign office in Raleigh during the 1972 election. Wrenn watched Jesse's TV editorials on Raleigh's WRAL-TV as a high school student in Durham in the late 1960s, and he remembered him as "mean." While a UNC student, Wrenn became more conservative, and, though something of a disaster as a student, he became fascinated with politics. After working in a congressional election in Asheville in 1974, he joined the Congressional Club staff. Wrenn, who wanted to attend graduate school in history and work only temporarily at the Club, left UNC before graduating (he never graduated). By the spring of 1975, Wrenn was running the Club under Ellis' direction.[4]

Other key figures of the Club's inner circle included Arthur Finkelstein and Earl Ashe. Finkelstein was a fierce libertarian who had once participated in a radio show with Ayn Rand while he was a college student at Columbia. He began a career as a pollster with NBC News and later became involved in James Buckley's mercurial but successful campaign in New York as an independent Conservative Party candidate for U.S. Senate in 1970. Ellis sought at least partly to model the 1972 Helms campaign on Buckley's victory, and he heard about Finkelstein and recruited him. Carter Wrenn, who worked with him in numerous campaigns, described Finkelstein as one of the three most brilliant

people in politics that he had ever encountered. He was able to "take a poll and look at numbers, and see emotions," according to Wrenn. Finkelstein, who was gay and would later break with Helms because of his anti-gay positions, was casual and even sloppy; Ellis always wore a tie. Though opposite, the two men developed and sustained a creative energy. Ellis appreciated Finkelstein's intelligence and ability to understand politics. "Just knock on his head," he said once, "and he'll give you an idea." In a room with Finkelstein and Ellis was like a "wrestling match . . . at the Coliseum," according to Wrenn, but Ellis "absolutely just challenged him, pumped him." Out of this Finkelstein-Ellis relationship emerged ideas for political ads or strategies.[5]

In charge of research was Bob Harris. While still a student at N.C. State, he had started working in the summer of 1977 with the Club as a volunteer who opened mail. Harris, though suffering from muscular dystrophy, became one of the Club's most dedicated workers. Wrenn noticed him there, and wanted to find something that Harris was physically better able to do. Ellis suggested that he might work reading the clippings that were coming in from a newspaper service; he marked these up and sent them to Ellis Graduating from State in 1978, Harris went to work for the Club full-time, and he wrote most of the organization's fundraising letters. In 1981, after his illness made him bedridden, Harris became the Club's chief researcher. In John East's Senate campaign of 1980, in which the Club engineered the upset of incumbent Democratic Senator Robert Morgan, Harris assembled materials for many of the campaign negative TV ads. For part of 1981, when Wrenn went to Washington to set up East's Senate office, Harris ran the Club along with Jim Cain, another operative. For the 1984 campaign, Harris, said to have a photographic memory, scoured Hunt's legislative and political record, amassing a

huge file and working closely with strategists and ad production people. All ads began with research: the campaign team would let Harris know about an idea, and he would then put meat on the bones and usually produce bullet points and a draft script for an ad. Harris' material was then dispatched to Earl Ashe, who often rewrote the script.

With ideas that came from Finkelstein and his polls, Ashe headed a production team, who joined the Helms operation full-time in what Wrenn called a "marriage made in heaven." From 1977 to 1990, Ashe produced every Helms TV ad. Ashe had a background in news production rather than advertising, but he had an uncanny ability to sense how to reach average people and to communicate the message in a clear, understandable way. Ashe's motto in creating political spots was: "don't get any bigger than what you can put on a bumper sticker." By the late 1970s, the Club's production side had become a completely in-house operation.[6]

As the Club began organizing Helms fourth Senate campaign, in 1990, Finkelstein severed his relationship with Helms. Originally attracted to Helms' anti-government positions, Finkelstein had become alienated by the Senator's anti-gay political message during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1996, a Boston magazine would out Finkelstein when it revealed that he and his partner (who he later married) had adopted two children and lived with them in Massachusett's North Shore.[7] By the time Finkelstein parted ways with Helms, the Club had refined techniques of political communication and management to degree unprecedented in American history. It became an experiment station that tested and developed new political techniques, especially in the use of polling, advertising, and manipulation of the media. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Club mastered the fine art of direct mailing fundraising, and they created a

huge money machine. Not only did the Club refine the development of a list, they also polled the list, and from the polling learned about the demographics and giving habits of their donors.

The Club also learned how to use political advertising with maximum efficiency. Finkelstein and Wrenn both believed in accuracy of scientific polling, and they employed massive amounts of it. At the same time, part of the genius of the Club's use of polling and media was to discover the most effective means to place political advertising. The Club polled TV watchers, but, unlike Nielsen pollsters, they determined the political makeup of the television-watching electorate. Armed with a highly sophisticated knowledge of their target audiences, they reached specific groups through advertising. The Club worked with one of the best "time buyers"—the people who bought ad time—in Robert Holding, and working with him, they were able maximize the impact of their money on television. Holding, an experienced television person and what Wrenn called the "best damn horse trader I ever saw," exacted discounted rates from television stations in massive buys. In the campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s, the Club achieved efficiencies that provided them with more ad times and a lower cost than their competitors. In all of these innovative methods of polling, media, and political advertising, the Congressional Club became what Wrenn called a "college for politics."[8]

In the Senate campaign of 1990, Democrat Harvey Gantt challenged Helms and vied to become the first African American in the South to be elected to the U.S. Senate since Reconstruction. A successful architect, Gantt grew up in poverty in Charleston, South Carolina, attended Iowa State in 1961, and then attempted to transfer to Clemson

University, which had never before enrolled black students. After a federal lawsuit, he was admitted in 1963, a few months after James Meredith enrolled at the University of Mississippi. Subsequently, Gantt became the first black mayor of a large North Carolina city when he was elected Charlotte's mayor. In 1987, Republican Sue Myrick defeated Gantt when he ran for a third term by campaigning on traffic jams and governmental mismanagement and by charging that Gantt had used his status as mayor to obtain a share of a local television which he later sold at a profit. Coming back from this defeat, Gantt, on the heels of a solid black turnout, won a plurality in the May 1990 Democratic primary, and he then achieved a solid majority (by 57 percent to 43 percent) in the June 1990 runoff with his opponent, Mike Easley.

The Helms managers considered Gantt the weakest candidate in the field. They believed that Hunt would have been the most difficult, but they worried about Easley's appeal to white voters enough to run ads in the second primary that sought to help Gantt win the nomination. The Helms campaign feared that if Easley (who in 2000 was elected governor of North Carolina) won the nomination, as an unknown, he could become, as Wrenn put, "anything he wanted to be." During the Gantt-Easley runoff, the Club ran two sets of radio ads, spending more on media than either candidate. In the first set of ads, they attacked Easley as soft on crime and soft on drugs by accusing him of plea-bargaining a case of contributor's son caught with a pound of cocaine. Other ads criticized Easley for accepting contributions from the arts community. In the second set of radio ads, they attacked Gantt as a liberal, but reporters noted that the anti-Gantt ads had less of an edge and ran less frequently. Wrenn would later note that the Club ran these spots realizing that describing Gantt as a liberal in a Democratic primary

"intentionally"sought to help him rather than hurt him, while attacking Easley on the crime issue would hurt him. "We wanted Gantt," recalled Wrenn, "and we got Gantt."[9]

Gantt's nomination was historic: not only the first black to run with a major party nomination for statewide office in North Carolina, he was the first African American in the nation to run as a Democrat for Senate. Matched against a black candidate, Helms did not need to inject race into the campaign. His campaign trod carefully in order to avoid being tagged with race baiting, but this would not stop the Club from running an aggressive campaign against Gantt. The campaign immediately attracted national attention: *Newsweek* dubbed it "the most colorful, expensive and nasty Senate contest in the country," and the "New South" versus "Old South" narrative became a common part of national news coverage. This was a "test of just how much North Carolina has moved away from its segregationist past," wrote a *Baltimore Sun* reporter, while *U.S. News and World Report* declared that "Gantt cannot escape his role as the symbol of the next stage of Southern progress."[10]

Meanwhile, nationally organized arts, pro-choice, and gay rights groups were mobilized against Helms. In June 1990, the AIDS activist organization Cure AIDS Now announced a boycott on North Carolina tourism and of companies that had contributed to the Jesse Helms Citizenship Center, which was under construction at Wingate College and scheduled to open in 1992.[11] In August 1990, the Helms-Gantt campaign began in earnest with attack ads from both sides. Gantt supporters struck first. In 1984, Helms had been perceived as vulnerable on the abortion issue, but Hunt pressed the issue only hesistantly. Gantt was less restrained about the issue, and he enjoyed the support of the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), which hired R. Harrison Hickman, a

Democratic political consultant, to run anti-Helms ads. Hickman argued that the ads should take an aggressive posture on the abortion issue, which in North Carolina had a different and distinctive history. North Carolina was one of only a few southern states that had legalized abortion before the *Roe v. Wade* decision of l973, and it maintained state support for abortions indigent women long after the federal government had cut off such assistance. Hickman argued that NARAL should run an ad that stated that "Jesse Helms thinks your daughter ought to have Willie Horton's baby." Referring to George H.W. Bush's ads against Michael Dukakis, which accused him of having furloughed convicted black rapist Willie Horton—which was one of the most famous television ads in American history—Hickman saw this as a way to make Helms' core supporters "stark raving mad." What better way to explore the "nexus of fundamentalism and racial attitudes" and examine the abortion issue in the context of race? But Hickman's suggestion was "sufficiently controversial," even for NARAL, that they decided on a less aggressive approach. On August 12, thirty-second ads appeared in eastern North Carolina television markets that stressed the message that Helms had ten times proposed constitutional amendments to ban abortion even for victims of rape and incest. Helms, the ad's narrator said, wanted the "government and politicians to make this personal decision for you."[12]

Wrenn later explained that Helms' polling revealed a surge that the abortion issue clearly helped Gantt's campaign. Jesse had always been vulnerable on this issue; the Helms campaign never ran an ad on the issue in any campaign. Internal polling revealed that roughly nine out of ten voters favored legal abortions in cases of rape and incest, but few voters knew what Helms' views were. The injection of this issue in August 1990,

according to Wrenn, "put Gantt in the race," and the margin between the two candidates narrowed.[13] Helms managers responded with an aggressive media campaign. Although they claimed that they were responding to a Gantt attack and that they had originally planned to begin airing their ad campaign after Labor Day, in reality a media campaign was already underway, though much of it appeared in radio ads. In mid-August 1990 they let loose a barrage of hard-hitting ads that ran in eastern North Carolina media markets. Some of the new radio spots claimed that Gantt favored five different tax increases while Charlotte mayor. Other ads attacked Gantt for opposing the death penalty. Gantt said no to the death penalty for drug kingpins, rapists, and police killers, declared a TV ad. These were "two men with different values," with Gantt representing "extreme liberal values" and Helms "North Carolina values." In other radio ads, the Helms campaign suggested that "gay and lesbian political groups, the Civil Liberties Union, all the extreme liberal special interests" had come from New York Washington, and San Francisco to defeat Helms. Gay activists were supporting Gantt, and the ad told listeners to send a message to these "extreme special interests": "Go home. We don't want your values, your ads or your advice on how we should vote in North Carolina." Gantt opposed Jesse's efforts to limit "taxpayers' money going to pornographers," and he "got the gay and lesbian alliance on board" in this fight. The Gantt campaign responded with its own radio ad. "You knew it was coming," said the narrator. "Now he's at it again. This time Jesse Helms is out to tear down Harvey Gantt."[14]

The Helms campaign also sought to defuse the abortion issue. In a series of ads appearing in early September, a middle-aged white woman in a red dress—a Helms volunteer from Charlotte—claimed that Gantt favored permitting late-term abortion for

sex selection. Gantt, the woman said, was asking voters to approve "some pretty awful things," including aborting "a child in the final weeks of pregnancy" and aborting "a child because it's a girl instead of a boy." That, the woman declared, was "too liberal." Gantt denied the charges, criticizing the "whiny woman" who sought to deflect from the "real issue." The ad was a "lie" about his position on abortion. But the Helms campaign had laid a trap. Weeks earlier, Earl Ashe had dispatched a camera crew to film all of the Gantt's press conferences: today, this is a common practice, but in 1990 this was very unusual. In a press conference in Wilmington in August, Gantt was asked about abortion; he responded that he supported choice without any qualification. What about abortion for sex selection? Gantt responded by reiterating his support for unqualified choice for women. "I don't want to get involved in why a woman may be motivated to have abortion," he said. "That is really left to the woman, I mean her reasons, her motivation are her decision . . . whether it's sex selection or whatever reason."

With Gantt's press conference comments contradicting his unqualified denial that he supported unrestricted abortion, Ashe took the film of the Gantt press conference and transformed it into an attack ad that appeared on the airwaves on September 18. The ad, typical of Ashe's work, was cleverly produced. With a full image of Gantt before them, a narrator told the audience that Gannt had denied allowing abortion for sex selection. But "Harvey Gantt told the press that he would allow abortions," the narrator said, using the press conference footage, "whether for sex selection or for whatever reason." The ad then rewound Gantt's image, and the narrator said: "Did he say even for sex selection?" The screen then twice rewound Gantt uttering the phrase "whether for sex selection or whatever reasion"; the second time, the time was rewound in slow motion, and voiceover

said "Read his lips." In what soon became a familiar signoff, a voice proclaimed: "Harvey Gantt, extremely liberal with the facts." The ad had the effect of neutralizing the abortion issue; Walter D. DeVries, a political consultant, called the ad "devastating," hitting "you right between the eyes." According to Wrenn., it "worked like a charm." It "pushed Gantt as far to the left as Helms was to the right."[15]

As early as August 1990, moreover, the race issue also appeared in Helms ads.[16] In a fundraising letter sent out over his name on August 10, the Helms campaign featured a photo of Democratic National Committee Chairman Ron Brown—Brown was black—and pointed out that Gantt was the "first black man elected mayor of Charlotte." Asserting that Brown had described Jesse as having "made a career of bigotry," critics saw racial undertones in the letter. According to Charlotte political scientist Ted Arrington, Helms in the letter was trying to "connect the idea in people's minds that Harvey [Gantt] and the Democratic Party in general are controlled by blacks." In a subsequent fundraising letter that was dated August 17, Helms linked Gantt with black activist Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., and his campaign claimed, apparently without basis, that the black activist was leading a voter registration drive. Gantt described these fundraising letters as "clearly racist," but the Helms campaign issed a statement asserting that the challenger was trying to "hide his record by calling people 'racist.'" "If you can't answer a question," Helms said a few days later, "you shout bias, bias, racial bias."[17]

Jesse remained in the Senate, as well, because the Congress was considering important legislation, including a civil rights bill he opposed and anti-obscenity legislation for the NEA. Helms thus spoke to supporters by phone and then returned for

appearances on weekends. Gantt, who had logged more than 40,000 miles of travel across the state by the end of October, complained that Helms had refused to debate and that he was running a "remote-control" candidacy that relied entirely on paid media, while a *New York Times* reporter called the Helms campaign "perhaps the most controlled in history." Even Helms' Republican supporters worried that his low profile might endanger the party's candidates.[18] By late October, perhaps reflecting Helms' lifeless campaigning, the race had tightened, and predictions were rife that Helms' eighteen-year Senate tenure was nearing an end.[19] Gantt's coffers filled with about $100,000 a day in contributions—during the first half of October he raised $1.7 million, compared to $1.2 million for Helms—and his ads filled the airwaves. Indeed, in the last weeks of the campaign, Gantt actually outspent Helms on media buys. The Gantt ads stressed Helms' poor record on environment, health care, and education. On October 20, a poll by the *Charlotte Observer* reported that Gantt led by eight points, 49 to 41 percent. Election officials also reported a 10.6 percent increase in black voter registration, as opposed to a 5.3 percent increases among whites. Political observers described a "Wilder Factor" in which white voters told pollsters one thing and did another when they voted—there was, in other words, a gap between what polls predicted whites would do with regard to black candidate and what actually happened. It was so named for Douglas Wilder, a black Democrat who won the 1989 gubernatorial race in Virginia, but at much narrower margin than polls had predicted. In Gantt's 1987 mayoral race in Charlotte, polls had him ahead of his Republican opponents by nine points, but he lost by 995 votes. The Wilder Factor, according to some experts, meant that if Gantt led by eight points, the race was essentially even. Helms' internal polls showed a similar skew.[20]

Responding to the tight race, the Helms campaign ramped up their attack on Gantt. In ads and in Jesse's speeches, they stressed ideological differences: Helms was conservative, Gantt was liberal. "If ever there was a clear-cut choice—between a certified liberal and an unabashed believer in America's free enterprise system," Helms told a Rocky Mount audience in late September, "this is it." If Gantt was elected, Ted Kennedy would "welcome him with open arms."[21] Television commercials meanwhile emphasized sexuality and racial wedge issues. In campaign stops, Helms liked to remind voters about the NEA fight of 1989-90. In one of his infrequent appearances in August, Helms spoke to a group in Burlington and brought with him two notebook binders that contained Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs. When he finished speaking, he invited the men in the audience to look them over: "I say to the ladies," he added, "don't look at it." "If you think I'm shooting bull," he told the audience, "you men step up here and take one look at the pictures here." "You'll be sick." He reminded his audience that a coalition of liberal media and arts advocates were mounting a defense of "filthy so-called art" and locking "arms with the homosexuals and the lesbians in a crusade to defeat Jesse Helms."[22]

By late October, Helms launched a new attack on Gantt's gay supporters, who, Helms told an audience in Fayetteville on October 22, were collecting money from Washington, New York, and San Francisco gay bars. "Radical groups," he said, were donating millions. Gantt, Helms told another audience, was nothing but a "two-bit politician." Television, radio, and newspaper commercials emphasizing Gantt's gay support hit the airwaves, meanwhile, on October 23.[23] The TV ad began with images of newspaper articles about Gantt's trips to raise funds outside of North Carolina, along with

clippings from gay publications and a picture of Washington gay bar. Gantt, the narrator, was running a "secret" campaign with "fundraising ads in gay newspapers," and he had raised "thousands of dollars" in gay bars across the country. Gantt, the ad charged, supported "mandatory gay-rights laws." The radio ad was even sharper. "Militant gays," it said, wanted a "liberal, pro-gay senator" like Ted Kennedy, and Gantt, the ad charged, was running ads on "all black radio stations" with promises that he would raise "more welfare spending and more quotas for minorities." Why were "homosexuals buying this election for Harvey Gantt?," read a newspaper ad. "Because Harvey Gantt will support their demands for mandatory gay rights!" These homosexual "rights" might include teaching "your children," it warned, adding that this "may be O.K. in San Francisco or New York—but not North Carolina!" "Think about it," Helms said in another campaign appearance in late October. "Homosexuals and lesbians, disgusting people marching in our streets demanding all sorts of things, including the right to marry each other. How do you like them apples?"[24]

The sexuality issue—brought out in Helms' loudly anti-gay positions—served to galvanize already strong support among Christian evangelical groups. During the 1980s, the Christian Right had provided a core group of unwavering support, and Helms responded by advocating their positions. The "greatest threat" to America, he told the American Association of Christian Schools in February 1989, came not from invasion from abroad but from within, those who were "dead-set on making our nation a God-less one, rather than one nation under God." The secular forces were winning the battle. The Ten Commandments had become the "ten suggestions." Churches had receded in influence as government and welfare programs grew. As a nation, America had changed

from "God-centered" into a "self-centered abyss." He described sexual promiscuity, divorce, teen pregnancy, and abortion, but also drugs, poverty, increasing crime, and homelessness as evidence of this "self-centered abyss." The key to moral regeneration lay in combatting the "anti-God, elite establishment" that was dominating public life, and he identified organizations such as Planned Parenthood and the Children's Defense Fund as "determined to destroy the moral of America." The "arrogant homosexual lobby" must be combatted "for the sake of our families." The AIDS epidemic posed a threat to society, but it also involved an "underlying drive to make homosexuality simply an 'alternative lifestyle' rather than the deviant, immoral, perverted behavior that it really is." Challenging that establishment required courage and resistance to "surrender, tyranny and oppression." He compared politically aroused Christians combatting the secular threat as like David and Goliath: evangelicals were the "Davids of our time," Goliath "all around us."[25]

Throughout the 1980s, Helms' political managers worked with evangelical churches to facilitate voter registration, and the Republican Party hired operatives with contacts in fundamentalist churches who targeted unregistered evangelical voters. Party officials working with the Helms organization communicated with fundamentalists to identify a young church member willing to do this field work. Especially when Democrats engaged in well-publicized black voter registration drives, the Republican effort brought thousands of new evangelical voters into the electorate. [26] The Moral Majority, which had provided key support in 1984, had dissolved in 1989, but the Christian Coalition, headed by TV evangelist Pat Robertson, replaced it as a leading group seeking to mobilize evangelicals to support Republican candidates. Late in the

campaign, according to one account, Helms called Robertson and, explaining that he was down in their internal polling. The Christian Coalition swung into action by providing approximately 750,000 "scorecards," voter guides, inserted into church bulletins and distributed as leaflets, instructing evangelical voters to support Helms over Gantt and emphasizing the differences between the two candidates on social issues. According to Christian Coalition director Ralph Reed, in addition, the group made 30,000 phone calls on Helms' behalf. Helms political managers would subsequently suggest that the Christian Coalition exaggerated its impact in claiming a decisive influence. "I'm not saying what they did hurt," remembered Club apparachnik Mark Stephens, but "I can tell what they did wasn't decisive." Subsequently, the FEC claimed that these efforts were illegal because they involved financial support from an independent political group.[27]

The race issue, meanwhile, grew in importance during the waning days of the campaign. President Bush vetoed a civil rights bill and, on October 24, the Senate upheld the veto. While its supporters described the bill as intending to make it more difficult to discriminate against minorities and women in employment, its opponents characterized it as a "quota" bill. After Gantt criticized his vote in support of the Bush veto, he also criticized Helms' use of race in his radio ads. Denouncing the Helms campaign contention that Gantt was heavily advertising on black radio stations as "just garbage," he described Helms as race-baiting.[28] After Helms returned to the state for full-time campaigning, on October 28, his campaign began broadcasting the first of two controversial TV ads containing strong racial overtones. Reviving the criticism of Gantt's 1985 deal regarding a WJZY, a television station in Belmont, near Charlotte, in

which he bought and sold part ownership at a profit, the ad claimed that Gantt benefited from the sale because he was black. "Why was Harvey Gantt defeated as mayor?," the narrator asked in the third-second ad that contained only text. Gantt had invested $679 in a "minority preference to get a TV station license to help minorities" and then sold it for $450,000. Even black leaders, said the ad, believed that Gantt had sacrificed "principle for profit." A day later this same ad ran with one significant change: it said that Gantt had "become a millionaire" by using his "minority status."[29]

On the stump, Helms denied any race-baiting. Gantt, he claimed—referring to his opponents' radio ads—had injected race into the campaign by "saying one thing to the black citizens of the state" whlie "saying another to the rest of the citizens." At campaign stops in eastern North Carolina which he reached via a motor home, Helms played the Gantt radio ad, which featured a conversation between a man and woman in which the man told of dreaming that he had forgotten to vote. In the dream, Helms won the election by one vote. The man concluded that Gantt was the candidate who was good for "us" on the most important issues. "I wonder if you want a senator in Washington who doesn't know how to tell the truth," Helms said at a campaign stop. Gantt was guilty of "betraying" Charlotte blacks by personally enriching himself through a minority preference; he had a swimming pool and tennis court at his house. "He broke a covenant with the black citizens of Charlotte," he would tell an eastern North Carolina audience, "and they threw him out of office." In later charges, Helms would also assert that Gantt tried to obtain an interest in a Morehead City TV station in 1986-87, again by using minority preferences. Jesse also reminded eastern North Carolina voters that he had voted to sustain Bush's veto of the civil rights legislation. "If you want quotas to

dominate or dictate whether you get a job or a promotion," he said, "you vote for Mr. Gantt." At another rally that same day at a Tew's tobacco warehouse in Dunn, Jesse told listeners that the civil rights bill—which Helms called the "quota bill"—meant that "race comes before qualifications in job selection or promotions." Responding, Gantt claimed that Helms was spreading "lies and distortions" while waging a "politics of fear." As he had in previous campaigns, Jesse maintained that the press had distorted his record about race and portrayed him unfairly. Sticking his finger in the face of a *Greensboro News & Record* reporter during a campaign swing through Greenville, he asked him "how much money" did the Gantt campaign "pay you?" He found his audiences receptive, with one attendee commenting that if Gantt were elected he would give taxpayers' money "away to the hippies, the Jews, the niggers."[30] "People will say this reason or that one," commented another North Carolina voter, "but a lot of them aren't going to vote for a black man."[31]

Although Helms claimed that he was not using race as a political issue, it played a central role in a campaign strategy that was designed to compete for swing voters, virtually all of whom were whom were white. By running against a black candidate, the race issue was thrust before the electorate: would white voters choose a black candidate? As political scientist Merle Black observed, Helms was the "master" of racial politics, moreso than any other politician after "George Wallace got out of the business." Yet Jesse was also unique in his insistence on polarizing the electorate; most politicians did not want to concede the black vote, or to risk losing moderate white voters. "He's unique," Black said. "When he's gone, there won't be anyone to replace him."[32] As the campaign entered its home stretch, the Helms campaign pressed the issue by promoting

thinly coded language; he frequently emphasized the quota issue to audiences. The best known political ad of the 1990 campaign, without question, was the "white hands" spot, which began running during the last week of the campaign. Showing a white hand opening and then crumpling a letter, the narrator declared: "You needed that job, and you were the best qualified. But they had to give it to a minority because of a racial quota." The ad concluded with Gantt's image next to that of Sen. Edward Kennedy, with the narrator concluding that Gantt supported "Ted Kennedy's racial quota law that makes the color of your skin more important than your qualifications." The ad seriously distorted the truth. The 1990 Civil Rights bill—which President Bush vetoed in October 1990—did not impose quotas, which the Supreme Court, since the Bakke case of 1978, had held unconstitutional, and Gantt was no supporter of them. The quota issue was, in fact, a false issue that sought to inflame white fears, and, although Helms was not the only Republican to use the issue, he used more avidly than any other candidate in the country. As Gantt said, the ad was designed to "scare people along the lines of race." Helms, he said, was a "desperate man" who had turned to "old habits."[33]

The "white hands" would be remembered as a critical piece of political advertising. Because the Helms campaign could not obtain studio time in North Carolina, they turned to former Club operative Alex Castellanos; Ellis, Wrenn, and Ashe flew to meet with Castellanos, now an independent political consultant, in Washington and brainstormed scripts. The hands came from a cameraman, with Castellanos operating the camera in an Alexandria hotel, and when they had finished Ellis packed up the dubs of the videotapes and headed to the airport, where he checked his bags, which contained the tape dubs. When his flight was cancelled, he insisted that airport officials retrieve his

luggage, and he rented a limousine and drove through the night to rush the commercial back to North Carolina. Ellis arrived back in Raleigh "in a bad mood" during the predawn hours, and campaign manager Mark Stephens had about fifteen couriers ready to drive out the dubs to television stations around the state in time for their noon deadlines.[34]

Wrenn did not dispute the importance of the quota issue and how the Helms campaign had exploited race. "I can't tell you we planned it or polled it or calculated it," Wrenn told a *New Republic* reporter about a month after the election "We responded to what happened." But subsequently Wrenn would change his views: he later admitted that the Helms campaign's approach on race came directly out of polling and research. Bush's veto of the 1990 civil rights bill and the unsuccessful attempt to override his veto provided an unforeseen opportunity. The bill sought to reverse six recent Supreme Court decisions that had narrowed the meaning of job discrimination, and Bush claimed that the bill would impose quotas in hiring. Gantt had pushed the issue by campaigning against Helms' opposition of the bill, but, for the Senator's campaign manager, the issue provided an opening for a new political issue. Wrenn later admitted that the use of the quota issue was an instance of the Helms' campaign "aggressive playing of the race card." Still, Wrenn claimed that the impact of the "white hands" ad was greatly exaggerated. According to polling by the Helms organization, the ad was "flopped" and did not resonate well with voters, and it was pulled after several days' airing. The "white hands" ad was, in fact, less effective than the ad attacking Gantt on the TV station deal, which, according to Wrenn, "worked like dynamite" because it combined questions about affirmative action with questions about Gantt's character, and the character attacks always worked well in Helms campaigns. According to Ellis, as a result, the campaign

ran the attack ads featuring Gantt's controversial TV station deal more than three to one compared to the "white hands."

Although the "white hands" ad might not have had a direct impact, it served the purpose, as *Charlotte Observer* reporter Jim Morrill later said, of "warming up the audience" to the issue of affirmative action.[35] Both the "white hands" and TV station ads used themes of race to distinguish between Helms and Gantt, and this proved effective in driving white swing votes into Helms' column. From the outset of the campaign, the Helms campaign had hoped that they would face Gantt because was black, which was, according to Wrenn, "the reason we wanted Gantt." They realized that the race issue, pitting a white incumbent against a black challenger, would define the 1990 campaign, for there were too many white voters in rural North Carolina who simply would never vote for a black candidate. It was a "tribute to Gantt" that he did as well as he did; of the three Helms campaigns that he ran, Gantt mounted the best campaign of any opponent. But in the end race trumped everything else. "Don't let anybody kid you," said Wrenn, "the definitive issue of that campaign was race, from start to finish."[36]

The race issue played out on another front in the campaign's late stages. Sometime in late October, Republican party officials sent 125,000 postcards out to voters in predominantly African American precincts in twenty-nine counties. The postcards advised voters that, in order to vote legally, they were required to have lived at their address for at least thirty days before the election. Voters were further informed that supplying incorrect addresses violated election law because it provided false information to registration officials. Voters who had moved but not changed their address, the postcards claimed, were committing a "federal crime, punishable by up to five years in

jail"; those appearing at the polls would be asked how long they had lived at their residence. In fact, these were false claims: voters who moved but had not changed their addresses could still vote, and this was an obvious attempt to discourage black turnout. As early as the summer of 1990, according to Justice Department officials later investigating the case, the Helms campaign and Republican party officials had been discussing implementing a ballot-security program, but the plan did not come into effect until it appeared that the black vote might become significant. The Helms campaign and Republican leaders discovered that black voter registration had increased by 10.6 percent, versus a 5.3 percent white increase, between April and October 1990. The Helms campaign also worried about polls in mid-October that showed Jesse behind Gantt by eight points.

During the late 1980s, party officials had worked laboriously to construct a system by which they could identify voters so as to maximize turnout, but they noticed significant numbers of registered voters with invalid addresses. Republican state chairman Jack Hawke and Wrenn decided to attempt to root out these voters, nearly all of them black, as a failsafe in case of a close election. In mid-October, about the same time that news of increased black voter registration and of Gantt's lead in the polls became public, the Helms campaign contracted with Charlotte political consultant Edward Locke to run a ballot-security program, and he was provided with an office and staff support. Between October 26 and 29, Locke, with an office and some staff provided by the Helms campaign, mailed 81,000 postcards to voters in eighty-six mainly African American precincts, with addresses that JMI supplied; in the targeted precincts, blacks were 94 percent of all voters. On October 29, a second mailing went out to another 44,000 voters

who were selected from a master list of 260,000 voters whose residences had changed and whose addresses were different from those identified in their registration. The target voters were entirely African Americans. According to the Justice Department's investigation, the ballot-security program was run by the Helms campaign, and, more specifically, by JMI. Although Helms later claimed to have known nothing about the program and although his campaign would never admit to these charges, this was an operation that had the blessing of his political organization.[37]

In response to the postcards, in the days before the election local boards of election received numerous phone calls, nearly all of them from black callers who were worried about whether they should vote. Democrats claimed that this was part of a deliberate strategy to intimidate black voters and suppress turnout: the chairman of the state party claimed that this was "blatant intimidation." Democrats also produced a Helms fundraising letter in which he requested money to support ballot-security activities designed to lower black turnout. The Justice Department subsequently dispatched a team to investigate the charges, while the Democratic National Committee argued that the mailings violated a consent degree in which the Republican National Committee agreed that it would not conduct ballot-security activities in precincts where racial or ethnic considerations figured importantly. Although the judge agreed that these tactics resembled those banned by the consent decree, it did not govern the activities of state political parties. More than a year later, in February 1992, the Congressional Club—even while admitting having done nothing wrong—agreed to an out-of-court settlement. "The so-called civil rights bureaucrats left us no choice but to accept this agreement," Wrenn told reporters, saying that Helms' political organization did not want to pay for legal fees

to fight the case. Gantt, reflecting about the ballot-security measures, later described them as "voter intimidation, pure and simple."[38]

Nearly sixteen years later, Carter Wrenn would claim that the ballot-security program of 1990 was a "screwup from start to finish." The campaign, he said, anticipated that the election would be close, and in the event that Helms lost, they intended to challenge Gantt's votes. Wrenn had authorized Locke's mass mailing of postcards in order to track the returned incorrect addresses and thus to create the basis for asserting the existence of invalid ballots. He had authorized the program, but when the copy for the postcard passed his desk, he had "twelve other things" in front of him, and he simply overlooked it. So, apparently, did Hawke. Had he been more careful, Hawke later said, he would have reviewed the language in the postcards in order to determine its legality. Surveying voter registration to determine legitimate voters was legal, Hawke later realized, but using language that would intimidate or suppress the vote was not. The same explanation came from Mark Stephens, by then head of JMI. He called the program a "big screwup" in which, "if we were guilty of something, it was not having as watchful eye as we should have had." If this had been a planned political move, Stephens recalled, "it would have been pure stupidity." As it was, the exposure of the program, Stephens maintained, probably cost Helms more votes than it gained.[39]

Whether this explanation is credible is another matter. Hawke remembered that he reviewed the postcard's copy and sent it to Bob Hunter, who was then chairman of the state elections board and a Republican attorney from Greensboro. Although Hunter approved the copy—as did GOP official Alex Brock—the 1990 ballot-security program was clearly racial; both Hawke and Wrenn realized that the postcards would eliminate

black votes with incorrect addresses. Although this was legal, it targeted African Americans and was designed to invalidate questionable ballots. In addition, on October 31 and November 1, 1990, after the press had exposed the existence of the ballot-security program, JMI operatives sent out another mailing of postcards to voters in Mecklenburg County whose addresses had been misreported because of computer error. Where Wrenn, Stephens, and Hawke believed that matters had gone beyond their control was in those postcards that went to voters with legitimate addresses; the postcards' language sought to discourage and intimidate voters, and it formed part of a larger and more overt effort to drive a racial wedge in the electorate to a greater extent than in any of Helms' other senatorial campaigns. Would it be possible for a person so closely attuned to detail as Wrenn to permit a mailing such as this—a mailing that came in two phases—without knowing about it? In a close election, an election in which the Club was playing the race card, it was surely tempting to use other methods to minimize black turnout.[40]

The election headed toward a conclusion with Helms' sharply-edged attacks providing last-minute momentum. Jesse won reelection comfortably, by a margin of 53 to 47 percent. Helms proclaimed a victory over his liberal enemies. "If the liberal politicians think I've been a thorn in their side in the past," he declared in his victory statement in Raleigh, "they haven't seen anything yet." Watching the "grim face of Dan Rather" as his victory became clear, Helms realized that there was "no joy in Mudville tonight" as the "mighty ultra-liberal establishment" had struck out. Although Gantt attracted a majority of voters under age thirty, Helms received 60 percent of those over sixty years old. Most important, Gantt was unable to attract enough white votes; he

received about 37 percent of the white vote. Helms' use of the race issue, and his drumbeat about gays, stimulated last-minute white turnout. Overall, voter turnout increased by a half million voters over 1986 (when Democrat Sanford captured John East's seat), and, according to Helms' polling data, the people most likely to sit out a non-presidential contest were white conservatives. The turn to race during the last week of the campaign brought them out to the polls. The pollster's predictions of a Wilder Factor, it appeared, came true, as what most pre-election polls had predicted to be a close race turned into an easy Helms win. The last-minute round of ads attacking Gantt on issues of race and sexuality worked with white voters; appeals that linked race with the quota issue were especially effective. The racially tinged ads drew a sharp distinction between the two candidates, and a large, last-minute white turnout went in Jesse's direction. According to one poll, of those deciding late in the campaign, 61 percent went for Helms. The Senator also succeeded in painting his opponent into an ideological corner by convincing voters that his opponent represented political positions that were alien to traditional North Carolina values. Unlike Hunt, Gantt ran on a liberal platform that directly challenged Jesse on the issues.[41]

The 1990 campaign resembled Helms' race against run six years earlier in yet another respect: in the large amount of money raised and spent by both candidates. All told, Helms and Gantt spent $24.7 million, only slightly less than the $26 million spent in 1984. While Jesse spent $17 million, about $15.60 for each vote, Gantt spent $7.7 million, or about $7.84 per vote. Because of the expensive operations costs of Helms' direct-mail operation, the amount that was left to spend on the campaign, especially in the last month or so, was much less than the overall 2-to-1 ratio would suggest. From July

onward, the two candidates spent roughly the same amount on their campaigns. Gantt was more successful in raising money from liberal political action committees, most of them out of state, and he had abundant cash during October and November. When the campaign concluded, moreover, the Helms organization owed about $1 million in debt. The usually overwhelming advantage in money and television, in other words, had quickly disappeared, and to a certain extent Helms was a highly vulnerable candidate in 1990. This made the use of wedge issues of sexuality and race all the more important.[42]

Nonetheless, Helms' supporters claimed hypocrisy in charges of race-baiting. "There was only one race the media really, really cared about this year," said the *National Review*, and that was the Senate election in North Carolina. Helms' only "sin" was to show voters "where Harvey Gantt actually stood on affirmative action and gay rights." According to the liberal media's rules, support for affirmative action was acceptable, opposition unacceptable. But Jesse did not play by the liberal media's rules by permitting the Democrats and the media to define the agenda. Gay rights groups supported Gantt and provided money; it was no "foul tactic" to point this out to voters. Although liberals considered "certain interests as sacred" and opposition to them as "near-blasphemy," Helms rejected that notion. "If Gantt was going to mobilize certain interests, Helms was going to play to their opposites. And he won."[43]

Helms did "play to their opposites" in 1990, but that meant overtly using the race card, even while he attempted to airbrush it out of the picture. Helms, according to Wrenn, never thought that he could lose to Gantt in 1990, and his confidence lay in the belief that North Carolinians would never replace him with a black man. In March 1991, four months after the election, the Club sent out a fundraising letter appealing for support

to help erase the nearly $1 million campaign debt. The letter reproduced two articles from the *Raleigh News and Observer*, and both had words removed from the articles. One described a "highly, charged, racially tinged" contest, the other "feisty press conferences and racially oriented commercials." In the Helms letter to contributors reproducing these articles, "racially tinged" and "racially oriented" were both removed. The Helms campaign, concluded a reporter, had made changes that were "carefully designed to hide the racial content of his 1990 campaign." At the same time, he had "returned to a task he had nearly 50 years ago: editing newspaper articles."[44]

In the aftermath of the heated senatorial contest against Gantt, there were the usual tensions with the Congressional Club, which in 1994 renamed itself the "National Conservative Club."[45] The organization had continued to run as a well-oiled machine in the 1990 campaign; in two decades of its relationship with Helms, had raised nearly $100 million. In the three years before the 1990 campaign alone, the organization put out some 13 million fundraising letters, paying the postal service $2.7 million and using vendors throughout the country. Working with the Club, Helms, according to one expert, was "the single most successful political fund-raiser of anybody other than a presidential candidate." The Club maintained a close relationship with an interlocking set of organizations. Most of the money flowed from a national conservative constituency, nearly 70 percent of whom lived out of state. Many of them were small donors: some 211 contributors gave more than twenty-five times each, while one donor donated eight-four times. As part of the money machine, the Club incurred high operating costs: as much as 30 percent of what they took went toward expenses.[46]

For twenty years, Ellis and Wrenn had enjoyed considerable freedom in running the Senator's campaigns, but Helms became increasingly distanced from, and to a certain less uninterested in, day-to-day management. Removing himself from politics and focusing on policy "liberated" him from mundane concerns, said Scott Wilson, who served as political liaison on his Senate staff during the early 1980s. He was a "reluctant" candidate who hated asking for money and asking for political support. The Club was usually unable to persuade him to make phone calls asking for money, and he avoided money matters, remembered Mark Stephens, because he was primarily a "policy wonk." One reason that the Club adopted direct-mail so enthusiastically was because Helms refused to raise money. This "wasn't by design, it was by desperation," said Stephens. In other respects, Helms was closely involved. The Senator carefully scrutinized all fundraising letters that went out under his name, usually applying a heavy editorial pen to the text, to Wrenn's great annoyance. Helms later claimed that he had little detailed knowledge of the Club's political advertising, but Wrenn would later assert that he was actively involved in suggesting ideas. In any ads in which Helms appeared he read scripts in advance (often, once again, rewriting the copy), and he usually saw videotapes before ads were aired. Wrenn, during campaigns, spoke with the Senator more than once a day in order to keep him apprised of strategy and developments.[47]

The alliance between Ellis and Wrenn and Helms had been a marriage of expedience. Each needed the other: "Without him signing those letters," observed Mark Stephens, "we were nothing." "We didn't always get along with each other perfectly," Wrenn said, and their relationship was "sort of like Simon and Garfunkel": Helms and Wrenn "fought, but they made good music."[48] There was, to be sure, misunderstanding

on both sides. Helms did not fully appreciate Ellis' genius and how much the Club's fundraising machine had shaped Jesse's esteem and reputation. Ellis and Wrenn, for their part, handled Helms roughly, hauling him around the campaign trail. After years of this contentious relationship, Wrenn later observed, "we were just tired of putting up with each other," and the "bloom was off the lilly." The relationship was simply "wore out." Over the years, according to another account, while Helms had regarded Wrenn as "too sarcastic and verbally abusive," Wrenn viewed Helms as "too disinterested in campaigning and political pit fighting." There were ideological tensions; Ellis often suspected that Helms sacrificed principle for political expediency, while Helms wondered, in retrospect, whether the Club had grown too hungry for power and money. Usually these tensions between the Senator and the Club grew after the election cycle when they needed each other least.

Some of these tensions revolved around the Club's entrepreneurial and risk-taking methods. It operated by cash flow and by estimates of how much money would be raised. Part of the equation was their belief that they could run on a post-election debt: the Club hired CPAs to estimate how they could safely borrow. This became yet another way of maximizing its money advantage over its opponents. Helms was never comfortable with this risk-taking approach; fiscally conservative—some would say tight-fisted—he feared that the debt would follow him personally. Yet he also tolerated these methods. Wrenn recalled discussing a prospective debt with Ellis and Helms in Ellis' car a few weeks before the 1984 election. Although Helms objected to the debt, he did not prohibit it. "I'll leave it up to you all," he told Ellis and Wrenn. That, said Wrenn, was all Ellis needed in order to proceed. Following the 1990 election, Helms was appalled at the

$1 million debt that the campaign had incurred. Almost ritualistically, Helms had insisted at the outset that his campaigns should not incur any debt, but this ran counter to the Club's more adventurous philosophy. It was typical, in fact, for campaigns that depended on direct-mail fundraising, as did Helms' campaigns, to realize a large portion of their donations at the end of the campaign and immediately thereafter. Helms never completely understood these intricacies, and he would bitterly complain that the Club had abused his good name, which had become a "cow to be milked." The Club's need for money meant that letters constantly went out under Jesse's name; and the letters depended on pumping hot-button conservative issues to a largely elderly population. Jesse later complained that supporters would ask whether he was really in the dire financial condition that his fundraising letters suggested. "Jesse never saw any money," he said, and "I didn't need any money."[49]

Not long after the 1990 election, antagonisms between Helms and Wrenn burst into the open. According to Wrenn, Helms wrote a formal letter to Ellis disassociating himself from the campaign debt; the letter, recalled Wrenn, was "snooty letter" that was "clearly written" so that Jesse would have no remaining legal liability. He found Helm's letter "offensive" and a "venal thing to do," and he ignored it. Helms' campaigns routinely ran into debt: it became an important way of extending their fundraising beyond the campaign season. Wrenn was convinced that the 1984 debt, for example, figured importantly in their ability to defeat Hunt because it enabled the campaign to purchase critically important media, and he saw this as part of the overall strategy. Ellis, however, wrote Jesse back and promised that the Club would assume campaign

responsibility, without using Helms' name in fundraising. To both Ellis and Wrenn, Jesse's letter was "tacky," and the matter caused considerable "acrimony."[50]

Helms generally had little to do with the Club's operation, with one exception: he insisted that he review, and edit, any letter that went out under his name. Sometime in 1991, Wrenn had sent out a fundraising letter which, a year earlier, according to Wrenn's account, Helms had approved, that raised the matter of statehood for the District of Columbia. After he received a phone call from a reporter about the letter, Jesse claimed that he had not approved the letter; Wrenn believed that he had forgotten. Furious, but also sick, Helms placed an angry call to Wrenn. He first reached Wrenn's assistant, Paula Kay, and "reamed her out." Next he spoke to Bob Rosser, who worked with Wrenn, and spoke angrily with him. Rosser was certain that Helms had approved the letter, but it had been misfiled, and was not found for nearly another year. Wrenn was out of the office, en route by train from North Carolina to Washington, and when he heard from his office, he was outraged that Helms had abused Kay, a sixty-four year old woman, in this fashion. That was, he believed, was "out of line" and, indeed, "really a pretty shitty thing to do." Wrenn reached the Senator, and the two men had words. Wrenn objected to the abuse of his staff, and he pointed told him that this was a "pretty cheap thing to do"; Helms objected to the implication that he had one anything untoward.

Club workers remained certain that Helms had signed letter but that, as was common practice in direct mail, it was reused later on: Jesse had simply forgotten that he had approved the letter.[51] But the details of the letter mattered little: as Wrenn recalled, it was simply a "rack you hang your coat on." Wrenn had had enough; for years, he had put up with Helms' outbursts, and if he waited them out, he would eventually be "sweet

as a lamb." Helms, for his part, was sick of his association with the sordid world of fundraising. He had always loved being a senator; he resented having to be undignified in letter solicitations, but, as Wrenn recalled, "he liked the money," which he realized was the key to his power and his "single biggest political strength."[52] There had been, over the years, constantly squabbling about the content of the direct-mail letters that went out under Helms' name: always the careful editor, he insisted on scrutinizing the language. Frequently, recipients of the letters—and solicitation phone calls—sent complaints to Helms' Washington office, and Clint Fuller insisted that these went directly to Jesse. Fuller, remembered Scott Wilson, might have even "got a kick out" out of seeing Helms' reaction and the inevitably angry phone call to Wrenn. According to Tom Fetzer, Fuller saw Club operatives "as a nuisance, more than anything else." Jesse often felt similarly. He liked to say to congressional aides that the inscription on his gravestone would be: "Thankfully, the beggar dies." Often he agreed with these complaints, and he would, in turn, complain to Wrenn.[53]

From that point forward Wrenn and Helms refused to speak to each other, and they conducted business in a "very oriental relationship." Helms would call Wrenn but only deal with him through Kay, Wrenn refused to speak directly with Jesse. The split with Wrenn became widely known: in November 1993, Helms told a reporter that they had not spoken in "two or three years." "I do not know how they spend the money that they take in or who gets it," he said. "I just have no information about the club and don't want any." In March 1994, the Helms-Wrenn relationship continued to be strained when George Dunlop, serving as the interim director of the new Jesse Helms Center at Wingate College—the first director, James McClellan, had just been fired—wanted the

Congressional Club's mailing list. Later, in August 1994, Sam Currin, former Helms aide, was dispatched to obtain the list of more than 500,000 names. Wrenn had no hesitation about supplying the list, but the Club had used a complicated database Helms' computer people had difficulty deciphering. Dunlop, recalled Wrenn, thought "we'd hoodooed him." This was, Wrenn recalled, another example of the ongoing "messy divorce" between Helms and the Club.[54]

These tensions were aggravated by the Duncan McLauchlin "Lauch" Faircloth campaign of 1992. Almost immediately after the Senate election of 1990, Ellis sought out Faircloth, who had served as Commerce Secretary under Hunt in the 1970s but backed Helms in 1990 and switched affiliation to the Republican Party in February 1991. Ellis wanted to recruit him to run against incumbent Democrat Terry Sanford, who, they believed, was vulnerable, and Ellis knew Faircloth well, having represented him in a recent divorce case. Ellis had always preferred candidates who, like Faircloth, were eastern North Carolina conservative Democrats with an appeal to the crossover vote. He and Sanford were old friends and allies. Both worked for Frank Graham in the 1950 senatorial campaign and on Kerr Scott's 1954 run for the Senate. While campaigning, Faircloth and Sanford once even shared a bed at a friend's house. Sanford appointed Faircloth to the chairmanship of the State Highway commission in 1961, and he supported his unsuccessful campaign for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in 1984. But after Sanford's abrupt decision to run in 1986, which Faircloth regarded as a betrayal that denied him the nomination, and the old friends stopped speaking.[55] Ellis thus dispatched Wrenn to visit Faircloth at his farm in Clinton, and, when he arrived, Faircloth told him that he interested, but he wanted to know how much it would cost.

Wrenn estimated that he would need $6 million to win a Senate seat; he promised that the Club could provided $5 million. Faircloth's evident willingness to put up $1 million, according to Wrenn, sold him on Faircloth's candidacy, and in April 1991 he announced his candidacy. In 1980, in contrast, when the Club had recruited John East to run for the Senate, there was no discussion of money, and, for Wrenn, his willingness to take on a candidate for money reasons indicated "how far we'd fallen" from pure ideology to a combination of ideology and power.[56]

Neither he nor Ellis had, in fact, considered whether Faircloth was a true conservative. About two weeks before Faircloth was scheduled to announce his candidacy, Ellis remarked to Wrenn: "You know, we've never asked where this sonabitch stands on an issue." They then arranged a dinner with him to talk about his positions on key conservative issues. When Ellis asked him what his position was on the issues, Faircloth's face went "completely blank." "You write the music," he told them, "and I'll sing it however you say." Soon after he announced his candidacy, it became obvious that Faircloth held ambiguous political positions. At the news conference announcing his campaign in April 1991, he was asked about the abortion issue; in his 1984 campaign for governor, he had supported tax-paid abortions for poor women. When he told reporters that he maintained the same position on the issue, Wrenn, who was present at the news conference, unsuccessfully attempted to end reporters' questions. Later, Wrenn would describe Faircloth as perhaps the "most disappointing candidate" that he had ever worked with. Both he and Ellis should have realized that ideology meant nothing to Faircloth, Wrenn later observed, and "we should have run for our lives." But the true attraction to Faircloth lay at least partly in his willingness to put up $1 million of

his own money for a campaign, and that and the desire to defeat Sanford, rather than ideological purity, persuaded them to manage his race.[57]

In May 1991, the Club began Faircloth's campaign to win the Republican senatorial nomination with a fundraising letter, followed by ads that were aired in August.[58] By the spring of 1992, Faircloth's most serious opponent had become Charlotte Mayor Sue Myrick. In April 1992, about a month before the primary, she charged that she was not the Club's preferred candidate because, unlike Faircloth, she did not have $1 million of her own money to spend. Wrenn responded by claiming that Myrick's hostility dated to the 1990 campaign, when the Club turned down a proposal from her consulting firm, Myrick Advertising, Marketing & Public Relations, to work against Gantt in exchange for $50,000. "Her anger with us goes back to then," Wrenn told a reporter, her "ill will" had persisted.[59] Although Helms, as has been his practice since 1976, refused to endorse any candidates in the Republican primary, Myrick was convinced that Jesse was working behind the scenes. Helms was "not happy," and in December 1991 he wrote to Myrick, indicating his neutrality. "When the people at the Congressional Club choose to support a candidate," Helms wrote, they were "not speaking for me." Myrick then released the letter.[60] Ellis and Wrenn meanwhile resented Helms' neutrality. The election of Faircloth, who upset Sanford in the November 1992 election in part because Sanford, who was 75 years old, was hospitalized a month before the election with heart valve replacement surgery, did not ease tensions. Once Faircloth arrived in Washington, he and the Club parted ways. Only a few months into his term, in March 1993, he told the *Raleigh News and Observer* that Wrenn and the club were hired to "run the campaign, not to run a Senate office."[61] Subsequently, the Faircloth-Club

split would become complete, and Ellis was convinced that Helms had "poisoned the well" by changing the new senator's attitude toward the Club.[62]

Within a year after Faircloth's election, relations between Helms and the Club had deteroriated, but the crowning blow would occur over the firing of Helms' daughter, Jane Helms Knox, from St. Timothy's Day School, a private Episcopal school in Raleigh. After serving as the rector of St. Timothy's church for three decades, George B. S. Hale retired after 30 years at the church in the spring of 1993. A conflict then developed over the new rector, J. C. James. Hale, who had founded the school in 1958, faced mandatory retirement; under Episcopal canon law, rectors were required to leave the ministry by age 72. Canon law also stipulated that Hale should leave St. Timothy's and join another church, but he remained as chairman of the boards that governed St. Timothy's School the church high school, Hale High. In the fall of 1993, however, James dissolved the boards of both schools, removed Hale, and placed his own supporters on the boards. Jane, who was principal of St. Timothy's School, became entangled in this conflict, in what Wrenn called a "three-way fight" between Knox, Hale, and James, and they "were all fighting like cats and dogs." In the spring of 1994, a former board member accused Knox of permitting the teaching of the Bible in class, a violation of the principle of the separation of church and state that had governed the school since its founding, and this provided the basis for Knox's firing by an improperly convened board. Several weeks later, the board severed the school's connections with Hale, who had taught philosophy and overseen religious functions. If she had "done nothing," believed Wrenn, she would have survived—and he so advised her—but instead she appealed to parents to take sides in the conflict, and the battle became even more charged and personal, with two "armed

camps." In the end, with parents deeply divided, both Jane and Hale were placed on a paid leave and eventually left the school.[63]

Both Wrenn and Ellis served in leadership positions at St. Timothy's. While Wrenn served on the church's governing board, the vestry, Ellis had served as senior warden of the church, had helped to found the school, and had served as a member and chairman of its board. According to his account, he and the board were rubberstamps: only when the accreditors visited did it ever meet. Ellis had long been involved with Jane: some years earlier, at Jesse's request, he had recommended her for a teaching job, and, in 1989, he also successfully pushed her candidacy to become principal. Now, through little action of his own, he moved into the middle of the brewing conflict. While he was in South Carolina participating in a judicial golf outing, the Senator called him. "What are you going to do about Jane," Helms asked Ellis. "Jesse," he responded, "there ain't nothing I can do right now." "Thanks a bunch," Ellis recalled Helms saying angrily, slamming the phone down and hanging up on his old friend. For some time, Helms and Ellis did not speak to each other.[64]

The fight over St. Timothy's School was, according to Wrenn, not an immediate cause of the breakup: rather, it was an extension of the "messy divorce" between Helms and Club, in which the estranged parties were fighting over furniture and pots and pans.[65] Some months after the Helms-Ellis fissure, in August 1994, the Senator announced the end to his relationship with the Club. Helms severed his connection with the Club and appointed a new treasurer of the Helms for Senate organization, Jack Bailey of Rocky Mount, who had long been associated with Jesse and had been active in promoting anti-gay political ads against Hunt in the 1984 campaign. Helms' embrace of Bailey, who in

1993 had feuded with Ellis and Wrenn over a failed deal to buy the Durham radio station WPTF, offered additional evidence of the break, as the Helms campaign had split into Wrenn and Bailey partisans.

The precipitating factor in the Helms' split with Ellis and Wrenn was the FEC suit against the Helms for Senate (HFS) organization, which, it charged, had illegally worked with the Christian Coalition in mobilizing evangelical voters during the 1990 campaign. In April 1994, the FEC issued a subponea requiring records about contacts and collaboration between Helms' organization and the Christian Coalition, and, as it appeared that Wrenn's interest and those of the Senator might diverse, both sought separate counsel. In early August, Helms moved to purge the HFS organization in order to mount a more effective defense against the FEC investigation, and the HFS moved out of the North Raleigh quarters that it had shared with the Ellis-Wrenn operations. Wrenn agreed to split his association with Helms amicably, though he worried about Bailey's influence.[66] Helms and Wrenn became even more bitterly estranged, as Helms charged that Wrenn benefited financially from his role in the Helms money machine. Wrenn, in response, released a financial statement in October 1994 that disclosed a net worth of only $152,532. "If you compare my financial statement with Sen. Helms' over the last 22 years," he told reporters, "I think it will verify that I have not profited unduly."[67] Wrenn insisted, at the same time, that a difference existed between the pre- and post-split HFS, and he refused to turn over records until the FEC ordered him to do so in April 1995.[68] Meanwhile, the Club began work on supporting a conservative candidate for president in 1996 to run against Bill Clinton—that candidate would eventually become Steve Forbes, and Wrenn would run his campaign—and Bailey explained that this

involvement "in other campaigns besides that of Senator Helms" meant that a split should occur. Jesse now preferred to return to "an organization of private citizens and supporters," Bailey said in a statement, "the way it was initially intended."[69]

The end of the working relationship between Helms and the Club represented a significant turning point in his political career. The reasons behind its demise went beyond minor disputes and personality conflict and got to the core of a transition, a sort of final chapter, in Helms' political career. Rob Christensen, who covered Helms for thirty years in the *Raleigh News and Observer*, believed that Helms, in breaking with Ellis and Wrenn, was "getting rid of the rusty knife." Over the years, the Club had done Jesse's dirty work by running campaigns in ruthless fashion and winning by whatever methods. The Club had done "rough things over the years," and Helms had permitted these things with a "wink and a nod." Now, however, Helms was more concerned with his "long-term image," and it simply did not fit into his plans.[70] Wrenn had done Helms' "dirty work" for him over the year, wrote *Charlotte Observer* columnist Jerry Shinn, including managing the money machine and helping to create attack ads that freed Jesse from campaigning. Now the Senator was feeling "a bit tarnished by what Wrenn did so well."[71] Club loyalists offered another perspective. The alliance between Helms and the Congressional Club empire had last two decades, said Stephens, and "in the world of politics, that's a long time." He thought the Club's demise make "an end of an era." After the 1984 election, the Helms political organization lost some of its steam and energy, and, with direct mail revenues on the decline, it simply was "a growth organization" any longer. With the end of the Cold War and the irrelevancy of

anticommunism as a political force, the glue that had held together conservatism was dissipating. The Club had been mostly "a bunch of kids in their twenties, with a whole lot of money to spend in elections" who were trying to "make a difference." These "kids" had made precious little money, but took part in an exciting ride and they "had a blast."[72]

Notes

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[3] Ned Cline, "Helms: Conservative Lone Ranger," *Charlotte Observer*, November 20, 1977; JWP interview, May 14, 1999.

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[5] Shirley, *Reagan's Revolution*, pp. 164, 309; Wrenn interview, September 27, 1996, NCGOP.

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Raleigh News and Observer, June 1, 1990; Kevin Ellis, "Easley Says Helms Would Rather Face Gantt in November," *Morganton News Herald*, June 4, 1990.

[10] "The Race in Black and White," *US News & World Report*, July 23, 1990; Stephens interview, October 10, 2006.

[11] "Great to Go with Gantt," editorial, *Raleigh News and Observer*, June 7, 1990; Jim Morrill and John Drescher, "Nation's Eyes on Gantt-Helms Match," *Charlotte Observer*, June 7, 1990; Garland L. Thompson, "Is North Carolina Ready to Elect Harvey Gantt," *Baltimore Sun*, reprinted in *Charlotte Observer*, June 23, 1990; "AIDS Activist Urges Boycott of Helms' Allies and Tourism," *Greenville Daily Reflector*, June 10, 1990; Ruth Sheehan, "Media Lining Up for Helms-Gantt Election Stories," *Burlington Daily Times News*, June 10, 1990; Seth Effron, "Nation Looking at Helms, Gantt," *Greensboro News & Record*, June 10, 1990.

[12] John Drescher and Jim Morrill, "Gantt Tries to Counter Tax Attack," *Charlotte Observer*, August 15, 1990; "Gantt Campaign Says Helms Ads Distort Record, But They Won't Say How," *Jacksonville Daily News*, August 15, 1990; Ken Otterbourg, "Gantt and Abortion-Rights Group Are in Collusion on Ads, GOP Says," *Winston-Salem Journal*, August 14, 1990; "Why is Helms So Hot?," editorial, *Charlotte Observer*, August 15, 1990; "The Truth Stalks Helms," editorial, *Raleigh News and Observer*, August 16, 1990; Hickman interview, April 21, 2006.

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[16] In September 1989, Helms hired James Meredith, who in 1962 was the first African American to enroll at the University of Mississippi, as a special assistant, his first black Senate aide. Meredith, after the celebrity of the Ole Miss desegregation fight, had become an increasingly erratic figure, at odds with mainstream civil rights leaders. NAACP head Benjamin Hooks described him as having a "difficult time keeping in touch with reality."[16] Beginning in 1988, Meredith sent a letter to all members of Congress, criticizing black civil rights leaders as corrupt and involved in drugs. On December 9, 1988, Meredith and Jesse both spoke in Miami at a forum. After hearing Meredith's views about race and his support for the Republican Party, in late 1988 and early 1989 struck up a correspondence in which Meredith wrote of a "sense of divine guidance" that was guiding him as a black leader. Helms eventually offered him a job, and urged him to promote his agenda through the Senator's office, and Meredith immediately accepted. Named as Helms' special assistant, his duties remained unclear, even to his co-workers; he was reported was receiving the lowest pay of any regular staffer. In late October 1989, nearly two months after coming to Washington, Meredith told a reporter that he had seen Helms only once since he had joined his staff. Helms evidently hired him for political purposes, to counterbalance his civil rights critics. On the floor of the Senate, Helms in February 1990 told of Meredith's critique of the liberal welfare state and the threat it posed to the American family. Soon after Meredith joined the staff, Helms made a point of introducing him to his liberal adversary Sen. Edward Kennedy. "Have you met my new staffer, James Meredith," he asked. Others in the Helms office viewed Meredith as quirky, mystical, and even incoherent. He seemed to pursue his own agenda; he did not fit into the office structure.

In 1990, Meredith began to attract attention. In March, he told an audience at Chapel Hill that affirmative action was part of plan by white liberals that sought to make the "black race incapable of competing" and who had "created the concept in order to provide a system of payoff and control of the black elite they needed as leverage to control the black masses." Speaking at Suffolk University in Boston a few days later, Meredith declared that slavery was "no big deal" and that the movement seeking divestiture of American investments in South Africa was part of an attempt by the liberal elite to control the black vote. In July, Meredith, who had already broken with civil rights leaders, declared that over 60 percent of the 3,000 delegates to the NAACP meeting were "involved in the drug culture" and that more

than 80 percent in "criminal or immoral activities." He also told of his "divine responsibility" to lead "the Black Race to its rightful position among men." Helms refused to disavow the statement, telling reporters that Meredith was "entitled to his judgments, and his judgments are good on many, many things." Jesse believed, indeed, that he "has a point." In an essay that appeared in a publication of the Heritage Foundation, Helms said that Meredith was "absolutely right" in his analysis that "too many" civil rights leaders had "no desire whatsoever to achieve equality for all blacks." Meredith's attack caused a stir, with many North Carolina black leaders believing that this represented an attempt to discredit blacks leaders and Gantt specifically. Other observers agreed. "You can't say it was planned," UNC political scientist Thad Beyle told *Newsweek* in an interview, "but you can't say it wasn't part of the campaign strategy." "One of the things Helms always does is send a signal to the boys at the gas pumps, the good ole boys." "History Repeating?"; Charles Babington, "Former Civil-Rights Leader Ranks 12th in Pay Among Helms Aides," *Raleigh News and Observer*, June 24, 1990; "Meredith Invitation Withdrawn," *Raleigh News and Observer*, August 13, 1990; Jim Morrill, "Parties Argue: Who Injected Race Issue into Campaign?," *Charlotte Observer*, August 17, 1990; Ferrel Guillory, "When Looking Ahead, Does Helms Have Vision," *Raleigh News and Observer*, October 26, 1990; "Under the Dome," *Raleigh News and Observer*, August 23, 1990; Rob Christensen, "Gantt Charges 'Racism,'" *Raleigh News and Observer*, August 25, 1990; Seth Effron, "Helms Laughs at Racism Charge," *Greensboro News & Record*, August 26, 1990.

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