

Interview number A-0124 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

This is an interview with Senator Jesse Helms, conducted on March 8, 1974 by Jack Bass.

J.B.: Senator Helms, basically how did you get active in the Republican party and in politics? You don't have a tradition of being a "politician."

Helms: Well, I've been on the perimeter of politics, I guess, all my life, all my adult life. As you know, I was a Democrat by registration until September of 1970, even though I never voted for a Democrat nominee for president. Never had that experience. I was in Washington two or three years in the early fifties as administrative assistant to two Democratic senators, as you know, and when the conservative faction of the Democratic party prevailed in North Carolina, I did do some work for the party. I did some writing, I wrote speeches for a number of prominent Democrats from time to time, helped in other ways. But the party veered so far to the left nationally, and was taken over by the people whom I'd describe as substantially left of center in North Carolina. And I think I felt, as many other Democrats felt and feel, that really I had no real faith in the party. But I didn't do anything about it. Changing parties, changing party registration, is like moving from a church. But President Nixon's speech at Kansas State, I think it was, persuaded me that maybe the Republican party in North Carolina and in the nation had a chance to restore the two party system. Not merely in terms of electing a president, but in getting a Congress that could be reasonably expected to pull us back to the point of fiscal sanity. And in other matters. So I quietly switched my registration, with no idea

at all of ever being a candidate. I thought I would be able to contribute something, perhaps, to this two party system. I'd done a little writing, or other things. And then, as soon as my registration switch had been made public, delegations of citizens - most of them Democrats - started coming to see me, and they wanted me to run for the Senate. And I laughed at them. The idea seemed absurd to me in terms of any real possibility, and in any case, I had a good job which I enjoyed. And I sent them away, with gratitude, of course, for the compliment. But it persisted. And finally, along about the first of January there came a group of people, Republicans and Democrats, with the same story. And they were so persistent that finally I said, "Well, you folks would like for me to run, but you know that I don't have a chance to win the Republican nomination, being in the party just a little over a year." They said, "Well, you're wrong about that. We think that you'd be surprised at the support you'd have if you would just come out." And I said, "Well, I don't agree with you." So as a parting shot, one of them said, "Would you object to our sending out some letters to test what might be the strength that you would have?" I said, "Well, you're going to invalidate what I've said to you, waste your postage and your time, but you can do that if you'd like. Just so long as it does not imply any commitment to run." Well, they sent out, as I recall, about 4,000 letters of the customary type, saying that Jesse might run if you write to him and get three or four of your other friends to write. And maybe send him a dollar or two, on the condition that it be sent back to you if he does not run. Well, I thought that was the end of it, but within about two weeks we had, as I recall, about 15,000 pieces of mail and about \$19,000 or \$20,000 worth of money. And then I began to look at it seriously, and ultimately I got into it. That's a long answer to your question, but you asked for it.

J.B.: You said initially Democrats came to you, though?

Helms: Oh, yes.

J.B.: Were they interested in you running as a Democrat?

Helms: Oh, yes.

J.B.: In the primary.

Helms: Yes. They came for two reasons. One was an apprehension, which I did not share, that Senator Jordan would be defeated in the primary. Or that he might not survive. Now, that's a delicate thing, and I want you to be careful how you handle that, putting it in the book.

J.B.: Right. Okay. Because of his health situation at that time.

Helms: Yes. I ask you, especially, that you handle this with care, because Senator... is still alive. He's in bad shape, but... there were many of his friends who were fearful that he could not survive the campaign. Of course, they were proved wrong. Then there were others who were disenchanted with Senator Jordan because they disagreed with him on his handling of the Bobby Baker case and for a variety of reasons. But they wanted some fire insurance in the event that something should happen to Senator Jordan, either defeat or worse, and that Mr. Galifianakis should prove to be the nominee. I didn't think that Mr. Galifianakis would be the nominee. I thought Mr. Jordan would. But they were right and I was wrong.

J.B.: Do you see a re-alignment developing in North Carolina? Where do you see the conservative Democrats in North Carolina going? And by conservative Democrats I think I'm really speaking of the kind of Democrat that you see in eastern North Carolina.

Helms: Well, I think that...

J.B.: Who frequently, say, votes for George Wallace, who has a large following in the east.

Helms: Well, I think that Governor Wallace is a symbol to a vast number of people in our state. I don't necessarily say that they're conservatives or moderates or liberals. I simply say that they are frustrated, because what they want, in my judgment, is somebody who will tell... who will level with them. Whether they agree with him or not. But who will tell them what he thinks and what he will do, and then do it. And George Wallace comes through as a man of that image. I'm sure that a lot of people who don't fully agree with George Wallace voted for him, simply because they felt that they could rely on his word. I hope, of course, that some of them voted for me for that reason. And... to answer your question, I don't think there's going to be any re-alignment until there is a persuasive force in the political life of our state, that can get across this message that I'm going to tell you the truth, and I'm going to do what I say to the best of my ability. Now, whether the Republican party can do that, or whether the Democratic party can do that, I don't know. It remains to be seen.

J.B.: Do you think politics in North Carolina, then, are more likely to revolve around personalities than parties?

Helms: No, I think they revolve around issues. And a complete disenchantment with headstrong government that intruded into the lives of every citizen, whether it be in North Carolina or otherwise. And the people basically, both consciously and subconsciously, are rejecting the kind of government that deprives them of their decision making right. They are unhappy about inflation, and why shouldn't they be? They are unhappy about forced bussing. You could pull any thread from the fabric, and you can find discontent. There's just a welling up of sentiment against too much government.



J.B.: When you use the term forced bussing, what do you refer to specifically?

Helms: Well, I am speaking, of course, of government assignment of students on the basis of race. Now, we've got discrimination in reverse now, in this forced bussing. In the idea of children being assigned to schools on the other side of town, just to achieve some sort of "racial balance" that satisfies the whims or caprice of some bureaucrat or judge or both. And that's the way I'd describe forced bussing.

J.B.: So with the Supreme Court mandate what it is at the moment, so far as school desegregation is concerned, and in urban areas where housing patterns tend to be based predominantly on race, how... what other means would be available to desegregate the schools?

~~Helms:~~

Well, I'm not saying that desegregation is the important thing. I think education is the important thing, and one thing that everybody agrees on is that the quality of education is deteriorating. Now, I know you've seen the same polls that I've seen, that not... this is not a racial issue any longer, because black parents object to forced bussing just as much as the white parents. And the hostilities in the schools and the frustration of the teacher in trying to cope with the situation, when the psychology of the classroom is just one of destruction and apathy and all the rest of it. Now, our schools are going to pot. Now, I think that my dear colleagues on the floor of the Senate are mistaking the mood of the people, and this may well affect their futures. I hope <sup>if</sup> it will, because/they can't change their mind in the face of obvious fact, when they have been proved wrong, then they need to be eliminated from the Senate. If I'm wrong, they well may eliminate me. But I don't think I'm wrong.

J.B.: Insofar as the Republican party in North Carolina is concerned, how do you view your role in the party?

Helms: Well, I think my first duty is to be as effective a senator in espousing and defending the principles which I believe. I don't want a faction in the Republican party. I don't want to control the Republican party, and I've never done anything to indicate otherwise. But if I have a role in the Republican party, I hope it is one of persuading all Republicans that we have got to stand for principles. That we can't be honest, let alone win an election, by being a little bit liberal than the Democrats. We can't be all things to all men. We have got to take our stand. Now, if I can to any degree persuade the of the Republican party that this is the way to go, in terms of being intellectually honest and politically successful, that I accept that role, if I can do it.

J.B.: What do you see as the formula for growth of the Republican party in North Carolina? There're two patterns that we keep hearing, talking to the Republicans throughout the South. One is the talk of re-alignment, attracting conservative Democrats who are uncomfortable in the Democratic party. The other is broadening the base of the Republican party by attracting blacks, by attracting urban moderates, they usually refer to. By expanding their base in that direction.

Helms: Well, I think it's sheer folly to try to expand the base on any ethnic ratio. I would hope that we would expand the base by attracting all people, whatever their race, whatever age, religion, and all the rest of it, who share the fundamental concerns of what I believe the Republican party should be... I think we should take our stand, win or lose, and let it all hang out. If we try to cajole and compromise, that's the road to defeat. The Republican party has no future because the Democratic party has demonstrated through the years, for a generation now, that it intends to

buy votes any way that they can be bought. These give-away programs, welfare and all the rest of them. Now, I don't want to be a Republican, a successful Republican, on that basis. I would rather be a private citizen. The Republicans may as well make up their mind that the left-wing spectrum has already been pre-empted. It's not available to them. Furthermore, if they... even if they could move in there, it would be intellectual dishonesty.

J.B.: How do you view the party... define the fundamental concerns of the Republican party, as you see them.

Helms: Well, I'm trying to articulate them, as a United States Senator. Ask me specific questions and...that would launch... to answer that question in a general way would take up 45 minutes. If you ask me specific questions...

J.B.: If you had to encompass your basic philosophy, as you see it, applying to the Republican party. If you had to summarize it, say, in one or two sentences, how would you summarize it?

Helms: Well, I couldn't do it, and no man alive could. But... and that's the trouble, trying to get a short cliché that'll fit. I think you've got to go on this... you've got to go, for example, with the absolute that this government cannot survive if it continues this fiscal irresponsibility, that has been practiced for a generation now. We have got to balance the budget. We have got to reduce government spending. We have got to remove the federal government from the lives of the people. The federal government was never envisioned to be a provider, a welfare organization. The constitution very clearly tells us what the purpose of the federal government, the government was intended to be. And so, to... in the broadest possible sense, I think we've got to look at the historic fundamentals of this country. And to realize what government

can do successfully, and should do. And what it cannot do. Now, that encompasses ten thousand things. The question is evident in practically every roll call vote we have. Price controls. The Republican party ought to be against them, because they won't work, and the free market system is the only thing that is going to work. In gasoline or beef or anything else. Wage... minimum wages. This is a purely political device. Anybody who is honest with himself knows that every time you raise the minimum wage, either on the state level or on the federal level, you do nothing but lop off thousands upon thousands of jobs and put those people out of work. The free market must prevail, and the Republican party, if it's going to mean anything, has got to take that position.

J.B.: Now, what does the... When the constitution refers to one of the roles of the federal government, to promote the general welfare, what does that mean to you?

Helms: It has nothing to do with the welfare system. Implicit, or perhaps explicit, in your question is the fact that you realize that. It would never envision that we'd have welfare payments, doles and handouts. I do think that the truly needy and worthy of society ought to be taken care of. I try to practice that in my private life as well as in my public life. But...

J.B.: When you say "taken care of," do you mean by government or by private...

Helms: Well, I would hope privately. And there was a time in this country when the brotherhood of man was important to most people. The churches were not so politically involved, and they did that sort of work. And other organizations. But even government's role, I would accept, on the basis that aid was limited to those who truly needed it and deserve it.

As a matter of fact, I think the truly needy and the truly worthy are being short changed by the existing welfare system. I could give you countless examples from our files where people who have no political clout, they don't belong to these pressure groups, they have difficulty in getting what they are entitled to under the law. And this is common to all federal programs. They are born of iniquity, and therefore iniquities will exist.

J.B.: What do you think has been the effect of Watergate on the conservative cause?

Helms: I think that Watergate has had no effect on the conservative cause, except in, perhaps, as frustrated individual conservatives, who realize that Richard Nixon is a symbol of conservatism, while not being a conservative.

J.B.: I don't want to get into Watergate in any detail, for obvious reasons, at this time, but what effect do you think it will have on the development of the Republican party in North Carolina and the South?

Helms: Well, I don't know. In a case like that it's highly theoretical at best. Our gain, I think, it depends on how many Republicans are willing to exert the energy to do the necessary work in standing up for things that really matter. There are two sides to this Watergate thing. The passage of time has obscured public awareness of the frame of reference for Watergate. I expect that if Mr. Nixon, in the fall of '72, or whenever it was, the publicity was mushrooming, began to mushroom about Watergate. If he had stepped forward and said, "Yes, we tried to find out about Ellsberg, because Ellsberg is a thief. He was perfectly willing to be a traitor." I think that, instead of condemning the burglary, that the American people, right or wrong, would have cheered. People have forgotten, now, that a bomb went off in the capitol over

here, and blew out the window of the dining room, that the cracks are still in. They have forgotten the burning campuses and the mobs in the streets, and the bums who were spitting on the American flag. Now, if the Republicans should all of a sudden decide to say, "Now, wait a minute. I don't like burg... bugging and burglary any more than you do. But let's put this thing in perspective." And I think, also, that the Republicans ought to make the American people aware that the United States Senate - and you can go to the record and look at it - that the United States Senate overtly refused to examine any corruption in politics except that one year. We tried to get an overall picture of it, so that the purpose of the Committee, as I understand the way these things operate - and that is to see if further legislation is needed - that's the only excuse for a congressional committee, by the way... To see whether we ought to take care that there is not a repeat performance of Bobby Kennedy, who tapped the telephones of everybody in sight, including 38 senators of the United States. But you never read about that. The Republicans... the Watergate crowd, I dis-associate the Republican party from the Committee to Re-elect. And I don't do that as a matter of convenience. I think it's a fact, because the Republican National Committee had no idea what was going on. There's plenty of evidence for that. But I think it's time the Republicans put this thing in perspective, not only as to the prevailing conditions at the time it happened, but let's see who else has been doing it. And collect the whole smelly mess of American politics. But, no, the Ervin Committee was set up for the one purpose of dragging through this 1972 campaign, period. Not a thing was said about the Democratic primary - presidential primary of '72, when all sorts of dirty tricks went on. Not a thing was said about Jack Kennedy

buying the vote in West Virginia in 1960. Hubert Humphrey would be a good witness on that. Not a thing was said about the libels and slanders about Goldwater in '64. Who did that? Did Ehrlichman do it? Haldeman? I'm not defending Ehrlichman and Haldeman. I scarcely even know them. But Barry Goldwater was libeled and slandered from one end of this country to the other, but oh, no. We won't look into that. We will just confine ourselves to that poor little sweet Ellsberg, whose only crime was willingness to sell out his country and to steal documents from the government of the United States and turn them over to an irresponsible New York Times. If that's too harsh, so be it.

J.B.: Getting back to the Republican party in North Carolina, at least I think there's a general public perception there being, basically, a Helms wing and a Holshouser wing, and there've been, within the party, the Ralph Bennett fight - as it's called. And then there's been the maneuverings, if I may use that word, leading up to the senatorial - the announcements of the senatorial campaign, the current one, between Senator Horton and Stevens. How do you feel about all of that? Those affairs?

Helms: Well, I remember a question like that was asked of the governor of North Carolina. He said, "Yes." You must be the guy who'll put the Lord's Prayer on the head of a pin. You'll have to break it down again, and I apologize for being so verbose, but there's no simple...

J.B.: Well, let me ask you this question. Do you feel that Governor Holshouser's moving in the wrong direction to build the Republican party in North Carolina?

Helms: I couldn't say that he is. I don't know. What do you think?

J.B.: I certainly don't know. If you were governor, what would you be doing to build the Republican party?

Helms: Well, I would have been for the med school at East Carolina

University, and the governor knows I differ with him on that. I would not have permitted an associate of mine to precipitate the Rouse confrontation. I would not have - now I don't know to what extent...

J.B.: Am I correct in assuming that that's a reference to Gene Anderson's role?

Helms: Well, I have to let you draw your own conclusions about that.

I don't want to attack anybody, but I... because I don't know for sure...

but I have been told that the governor was perfectly willing to work with Rouse and others were not. But I would have seen, had it been Jesse Helms - now I may well have been in there, or had I been governor, which I'm not - speaking hypothetically, but I would have seen an opportunity to weld together the two elements of the party. I would have certainly tried it. Maybe it couldn't have been done. But I took the position in the Rouse thing, that... while Frank himself will acknowledge that at times he's been a bull in a china shop, the fact remains that he was chairman of the party when the state of North Carolina elected the first Republican senator and the first Republican governor of the twentieth century. And I simply thought the man was owed some credit. Furthermore, Rouse did his best to help me in 1972, and I could not forget that, so, with that statement, I sort of stayed out of it. But... I forgot where I was... I think that's all I want to say on it.

J.B.: Well, how about on the Horton-Stevens situation, where Senator Horton also was a supporter of yours?

Helms: Well, I can only tell you the chronology of the events as I viewed them. I've known Mr. Stevens only casually. Ham Horton I have known somewhat better. My contacts with both have been limited. I was strongly in favor of Wil<sup>m</sup> Mizell running, and I did what I could to encourage



him to consider being a candidate. And I thought that he was going to be a candidate. Somewhat at the eleventh hour, Wilmer decided that he would not run. And I was chagrined about that, as were all the other Republicans, far as I know. There became an immediate scramble to find a suitable candidate to succeed Wilmer in that role. Now, at this point, I'll have to tell you what I understand the situation to have been, as reported to me by Tom Ellis, who was my campaign manager. Tom met with Governor Holshouser and Gene Anderson and Horton and others - I won't attempt... Tom will give you the names if you're interested, and he can give you a more accurate resume of what happened. But both the governor's people and Mr. Ellis apparently agreed that Ham would be an excellent candidate. Tom knew of no mention of Mr. Stevens, no consideration by Mr. Stevens concerning the candidacy. Tom and others went to Ham and urged him to run. I was called and told of the meeting with the governor, and what did I think of Ham Horton? I said, "Well, I think he'll be a fine candidate." They said, "Well, fine. Would you send Ham a wire?" I did. It so happens I sent him a wire the same day that I talked about 30 minutes on the telephone with Mr. Stevens about a furniture price control problem, and we discussed everything in the book, and he didn't mention his candidacy. The very next day, I had a call from Mr. Broyhill, Jim Broyhill, the Republican congressman, asking me if I was supporting Stevens for the nomination. And I said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "I sent a wire yesterday for Ham Horton and I talked to Bill yesterday and he didn't mention it. Is he running?" He said, "Oh, yes." And that was the first time... knowledge I had of the Stevens candidacy. So, I agreed to write a letter to Stevens, in which I commended him for his interest in government and all the rest. I simply said the same thing I said to Ham. And that's all there was to it. Now, whether any sandbagging

went on, I cannot testify to it. I don't know. All I know is that I trust Tom Ellis as being an honorable man who gets his facts straight, and Tom is just climbing the wall about this thing. But you ought to pick that end up from Tom, if you're going to pursue it. Because all I've done is be a... on the receiving end up here of that one. For my part, it was no effort to get a Helms candidate, because, as I said at the outset, I don't want a Helms faction in the Republican party. I don't want to control the Republican party. Have no intention of trying it. Never have. If I did, I think I would have been a little more adroit and a little more involved in the Rouse thing, and certainly in this candidate thing. But I have... I've been trying to do my job here, because I think that's what I was elected to do.

J.B.: Will this whole episode affect how much effort you put into the Republican campaign this fall, insofar as that Senate race is concerned?

Helms: No. My efforts in any case would have been limited, because the Senate's going to be in session and... but I'll do what I properly can. Because Mr. Stevens is a fine man. Now will this book be published after the election?

J.B.: Yes, it will.

Helms: Is there any way that it could be disclosed publicly prior to November that my anticipation was going to be, if I tell you?

J.B.: Probably could.

Helms: Well, I won't say it, then.

J.B.: Oh, no. I thought you wanted me to. No, no. No. No. No.

(Interruption in tape.)

J.B.: ... Holshouser in '72. How did you campaign, what was your relationship in that campaign?

Helms: We... Jim felt that we ought to go our own ways, and run as a team, but yet run our own campaigns. There was no coordination of the two campaigns. No. And I think the same is true in the Democratic party. I ran for the Senate, Jim ran for governor. Skipper Bowles ran for governor, and Nick Galifianakis ran for Senate. This is historic. To make anything unique out of that would be a mistake. It's always been that way, according to my observation. Now, furthermore, Jim had appeal that I did not possess. I may have had some that he did not possess. I had strength in the east, no question about that. Showed up in the map. He had strength in the west. How much vote he got in the east as a result of my being on the ticket, I don't know. How much vote I got in the west as a result of him being on the ticket, I don't know. But we had a... it was a pretty good situation because of the complexity and diversity of the many aspects of the four campaigns. That is to say, Galifianakis, Helms, Bowles and Holshouser. So it all fit into the funnel, came out right, from my standpoint and Holshouser's standpoint. I don't know whether this could be repeated in another year or not. I don't know.

J.B.: If you had to... where do you see the... well, two questions. Where do you see the Republican party going now, in party building and grooming candidates? Do you see them emerging as a majority party in North Carolina, state level?

Helms: Not any time soon.

J.B.: And why? I mean, what's the major problem that they have to overcome on that?

Helms: Well, I think we've already answered that. They've got to groom candidates... you don't... you don't... you don't take over and be the

dominant party unless you have people in office. And one or two people, even the two top statewide offices... it's the same thing... the Republican party did not take over the United States because Nixon was elected twice. And because Holshouser is governor and Helms is senator doesn't mean that the election is going to flip over. Because what's happening is that party labels don't mean anything any more to the majority of people. They registered Democrat for various reasons, as they register Republican. But when the push comes to the shove, I think the people are very discerning. They go to the man, and I think it's perfectly possible that a fellow could run ...a good man could run on the independent party ticket and conceivably beat a Republican and a Democrat in our state - provided he had the principles and was able to articulate his concerns and all the rest of it. So I think more than anything else, party labels don't matter to people any more.

J.B.: If George Wallace endorses some campaigns on the national Democratic ticket in 1976, whether or not he's on it, what effect do you think that'll have in North Carolina and in the South?

Helms: Well, it depends on who he endorses. If he endorses Ted Kennedy or somebody like that, George McGovern, it wouldn't make a particle of difference. You'd have to name me the candidate.

J.B.: You don't think the fact of Wallace's endorsement in campaigning for the ticket in itself would be a factor?

Helms: Well, it would be a factor, but not a compelling one. There are a lot of people who love George Wallace, but they're not necessarily going to transfer their allegiance to him to somebody that he likes. And this is historically politics, too. Even Franklin Roosevelt, who tried to purge Walter George down in Georgia. You just can't transfer it, I don't think. Do you?

J.B.: It's difficult.

Helms: Right.

J.B.: Suppose it was someone like Scoop Jackson. What would be the difference between Wallace staying out of it, and Wallace being actively involved? As an endorser or a campaigner?

Helms: Well, you get into a situation there where you would have to throw into that equation what is going to be done to analyze Senator Jackson's posture on various issues. For example, he three times participated in the blocking of an anti-bussing amendment of mine. Well, he didn't have to do it. Now, this would be made known to the people of the South. I told Scoop, I said, "You have just thrown away the South." And it shook him. And the second time around he wouldn't... if you go to the record and you can find where he and Javits did a toe dance on who was going to make the motion to table my amendment. It was "Oh, you do it." "No, I'd be happy for you to do it, Senator." ... on the floor. Because Scoop knew what was involved in the thing. So I would say that Wallace's endorsement of Jackson would be negated immediately by a complete revelation of what Senator Jackson did on the anti-bussing thing, for example. And there would be other issues. This energy situation has not been brought fully to the attention of the American people. Jackson took the point of view that the way to solve it was to cuss out the oil companies, and limit prices and all the rest of it. But I think that it's perfectly possible that the American people can be persuaded that this was exactly the wrong approach, to solve the crisis.

J.B.: You know, your critics... some of your critics say that when you bring up anti-bussing, that in effect it's arousing traditional Southern racial fears and antagonisms.

Helms: Baloney. They know they're talking through their hats. It's

nothing Southern about it. They ought to see how the folks in New York feel about it, in the case they're being bossed... bussed. Boss is right too.

J.B.: Without the Southern part, how about their charge that it does arouse racial antagonisms and fears?

Helms: Well, baloney again, because the surveys show that 80...87%, isn't it? 87% of the Negro parents polled objected to forced bussing. I've not had one black to write to me saying that he wanted forced bussing for his child. We have had many blacks to write to us saying, "Senator, I didn't vote for you, but you're right about this. I prefer my child to walk to school."

J.B.: Is there anything else you wanted to comment on concerning Southern or North Carolina politics, that we haven't discussed?

Helms: I can't think of a thing.