

Bryan Hardin Thrift. *Conservative Bias: How Jesse Helms Pioneered the Rise of Right-Wing Media and Realigned the Republican Party.* Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014. 262 pp. (\$69.95 cloth).

Bryan Hardin Thrift's book about Jesse Helms examines his career prior to his election to the U.S. Senate in 1972, based on considerable analysis of Helms's papers at the Jesse Helms Center and on other archival research. During the 1950s and 1960s, according to Thrift, Helms: improved the presentation and articulation of his conservative ideology; developed a media strategy for effectively presenting that ideology to voters; and helped to realign the southern political party system so that it featured a strong, conservative Republican Party. What the book does quite well is to describe and explain Helms's political style and strategy, both of which are reflected in the words and actions of contemporary conservative pundits and leaders. Thrift's book covers some of the same territory as William Link's 2008 biography of Helms (*Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism*), but while Link's book devotes most of its attention to Helms's years in the Senate, Thrift emphasizes his pre-Senate career.

Helms's influence during these two decades came largely from positions outside of government. After serving on Senator Willis Smith's staff for two years (1951-1953), Helms returned to North Carolina to become the editor of the *Tarheel Banker*, the publication of the Bankers Association. He used that vehicle to express his conservative viewpoints. Notably, he did not restrict his editorials to financial and economic matters. A controversial 1955 editorial attacked state leaders for moving to desegregate public schools, for example. In 1960, Helms left the Bankers Association to become the vice-president for news and public affairs at WRAL, a major television station in the state, not only because it was in Raleigh, the state capital, but also because it reached a large chunk of eastern North Carolina. This new position expanded Helms's influence: his conservative commentaries were viewed by many households in the eastern part of the state, and under Helms's direction, the WRAL news programs took a deliberately conservative slant, partly to counter what Helms and others at WRAL thought was a liberal bias in the mainstream media.

Thrift describes Helms's political style as "pious incitement." Helms expressed moral outrage at liberal policies, ridiculing them and impugning the motives of those who proposed the policies. Liberal policies were portrayed not just as ineffective or wasteful, but as undermining the moral fabric that had made the country great. Liberals were attacked as fools, as lacking the moral values that most common people possessed, and even as un-American. In criticizing liberal policies and actions from his WRAL megaphone, Helms often exaggerated and distorted the truth, with little apology for doing so. For example, he attacked the state universities, especially the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for harboring Marxists and radical left groups, even though there was little evidence to support these charges. This strategy aimed at blurring the distinction between liberalism and Communism, identifying both with elites who failed to share the values of ordinary Americans.

Although Helms remained a registered Democrat until well into the 1960s, Thrift argues that well before his own party switch, Helms saw the GOP as the party most likely to advance the conservative cause in the South. In North Carolina, that meant realigning the existing electoral landscape by moving conservative white Democrats to the Republican Party. Many of

these conservative white Democrats were in the eastern part of the state, precisely the area that WRAL reached. While these white Democrats might not be conservative on economic issues, given that most did not have a high income, they were likely to be conservative on racial, social, and national security issues. During the 1960s, the civil rights movement, the counter-cultural revolution, and the Viet Nam War all increased the salience of racial, social, and national security issues, making conservative appeals on these issues more effective. Moreover, many of these issues were well suited to the pious incitement approach championed by Helms. In his 1972 election to the Senate, Helms united white conservatives in the eastern part of the state with existing Republican strength in the center and western parts of North Carolina to form a winning coalition.

While Helms refined the articulation and presentation of his conservative ideology throughout the 1950s and 1960s, it does not appear from Thrift's account that Helms made much of an attempt to develop a deeper conservative philosophy during these two decades. All of his efforts went toward how to effectively present conservatism and discredit liberalism. Helms's economic conservatism remained based on some simple conservative principles, not on a more thorough knowledge of economic theory. His national security conservatism similarly failed to display a deep mastery of foreign affairs. His conservatism on social issues was based largely on his religious and small town background. Most of all, his conservatism on racial and civil rights issues failed to reflect a principled conservatism. More than once, he attacked civil rights leaders for inciting violence, even when they were the ones being attacked. He had particular contempt for Martin Luther King, which helps to explain his later opposition to the creation of MLK Day.

The book does a nice job of carrying out what it set out to do. However, the focus of the book is limited largely to describing and explaining Helms's thoughts and actions during the 1950s and 1960s. Although Thrift suggests that Helms was very influential in the development of modern conservatism, there is little actual analysis of how that influence took place. Clearly, there is a similarity between the political style and strategy of contemporary conservative media pundits and political leaders and that used by Helms, but did Helms truly pioneer the style and influence other to adopt it? Were there other conservative commentators who also combined pious incitement and effective broadcast media strategies in the 1960s, and thus equally influenced the development of modern conservatism? There is no doubt that Helms was a very influential figure in North Carolina politics, so much so that one could easily argue that the nature of the GOP in the state would have been different had there not been a Jesse Helms. That makes this book very worthwhile reading for those interested in North Carolina politics. What is less clear is whether the national Republican Party, national conservative media, or the national conservative movement would have developed differently had there not been a Jesse Helms. Perhaps future research will more carefully examine that question.

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REFERENCES

Link, William A. 2008. *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism*. St. Martin's Press.