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Reversing Gears: Jesse Helms's Embrace of Christian Zionism

MAXWELL ULIN

On October 6, 1985, Jesse Alexander Helms stood before the congregation of Northside Baptist Church just off Interstate 85 in Charlotte. With his back to the choir, the Tar Heel State's bespectacled senior senator gazed out at the immense crowd of worshippers in the pews before him. At sixty-five, Helms could have chosen many weeks to tag his "most meaningful," yet, in his retelling, the senator settled on a week in the late summer of 1985. That August, Helms and his wife, Dorothy, joined Sen. Chic Hecht of Nevada and Hecht's brother on a trip to Israel to commemorate the construction of a new synagogue in the Hecht family's honor. Helms recounted his tour through the Holy Land, pausing over the sacred nature of the "tiny nation" he visited. "The impact on me was enormous," he proclaimed to the Northside worshippers.¹

Something clearly had had a tremendous impact on Helms, as his praise for the Jewish State reflected a dramatic change in the senator's stance on Israel. Upon entering the U.S. Senate in 1973, Helms quickly distinguished himself as one of the chamber's most outspoken critics of the Jewish State. As a freshman senator, Helms proposed a resolution demanding that Israel return the West Bank to Jordan and went on to oppose economic and military aid for Israel. In the early 1980s, in fact, Helms specifically advocated for withholding military aid to Israel unless Israeli leaders halted settlement construction in the occupied territories.²

1. Jesse Helms, speech at Northside Baptist Church, October 6, 1985, in "Speeches to Various Groups," Jesse A. Helms Papers (hereinafter Helms Papers), Record Group 2, Senatorial Papers, 1973-2002, Jesse Helms Center Archives, Wingate, North Carolina. Documents from the Helms Papers cited herein are all from this record group.

2. William A. Link, *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 319.



When Sen. Jesse Helms and his wife, Dorothy, traveled to Israel in August 1985 to commemorate the construction of a new synagogue, Helms declared to the congregation of Northside Baptist Church in Charlotte that “It was the most meaningful week of my life.” Photograph of Helms in Israel from the Jesse Helms Center, Wingate, North Carolina, reproduced by permission.

Yet in 1984, Jesse Helms’s views suddenly changed. In May of that year, Helms called upon President Ronald Reagan to support the relocation of the American Embassy to Jerusalem, a goal long sought by Israel’s most committed supporters in Congress. In March 1985, Helms made a stunning policy reversal by declaring his support for continued Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. Over the course of that year, Helms began fostering an image of himself as one of the Senate’s leading advocates for Israel, culminating with his trip to Israel in August. As he stood before Northside Baptist’s congregation that Sunday morning, Jesse Helms’s political conversion had come full circle.³

As historian Tom Packer notes, Helms’s embrace of a more pro-Israel foreign policy position marked a rare instance in which the North Carolina senator actually

3. “Helms Stance on Israel Sparks Controversy,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, June 7, 1984, box 298, folder 13 “Campaign, Israel: 1984–1995,” Helms Papers; David B. Ottaway, “Sen. Helms, in Turnabout on Israel, Backs Continued Occupation of Lands,” *Washington Post*, March 8, 1985.

seems to have changed his views on a major issue.⁴ Over his three decades in public life, Senator Helms's positions on issues from civil rights to foreign affairs remained remarkably consistent, even in the midst of social and political upheaval in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the conservative senator managed to build much of his national public image around his unwillingness to change.⁵ Hence, whatever factors might have motivated Helms's change of heart with respect to Israel must have been politically important to him. Discerning these reasons could shed light on some of Helms's guiding political motivations and enhance our understanding of both the politician and the man.

Because Helms had such an important role in shaping the modern conservative movement his position on Israel is historically significant. His election to the Senate coincided with the national rise of what would eventually become known as the "New Right"—a loose collection of conservative activists that included anticommunist foreign policy hawks, evangelical Protestants, and Libertarian activists. Having positioned himself at the center of the movement, Helms played a key role in incorporating New Right activists into the broader Republican Party, using his high profile in the Senate to rally evangelicals around issues like abortion and school prayer. Helms also assembled an unmatched national fundraising operation that enabled him to promote conservative causes throughout the country. In 1976, Helms made national headlines by endorsing Ronald Reagan for the Republican nomination against Gerald Ford, and in the spring of 1979, he lent early support to pastor Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority.⁶ Both Reagan and Falwell would go on to play defining roles in reshaping the late-twentieth-century conservative movement, and Helms's early support for both earned him a reputation as one of the architects of conservatism's postwar revival.

During the mid-1980s, Helms became particularly influential on foreign affairs. From his post on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he pursued an aggressive anticommunist foreign policy agenda that combined capitalist idealism with realpolitik support for right-wing authoritarian regimes. By the end of his career, Helms had become "arguably the most influential senator on foreign policy during his tenure."⁷ The senator's lasting impact upon conservative foreign policy links his

4. Tom Packer, "Conservatives Look Abroad: Jesse Helms and the Foreign Policy of the U.S. Conservative Movement," *American Studies in Scandinavia* 45 (January 2013): 35.

5. Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 9.

6. *Ibid.*, 168, 175, 177, 178. Founded in 1979, the Moral Majority campaigned on issues such as abortion, school prayer, and federal tax exemptions for religious schools. Characterizing itself as "pro-life, pro-traditional family, pro-moral, and pro-American," the Moral Majority grew rapidly from mass donations and became an early organizational leader of the nascent Christian Right before it shut down in the late 1980s. See J. Brooks Flippen, *Jimmy Carter, the Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

7. Packer, "Conservatives Look Abroad," 36.

reversal on Israel to a much broader embrace of the Jewish State within modern conservatism. As a result, Helms's views on this issue offer a critical snapshot of the incorporation of Zionism into American conservatism. Since most existing historiography focuses on the movement's commitment to anticommunism and domestic priorities, Helms's changing stances on Israel potentially offer insight into an understudied aspect of the movement's late-twentieth-century makeover.⁸

Despite the potential significance of Helms's shift, explanations for the senator's policy reversal have remained largely incomplete. Helms and his close supporters pointed to his 1985 trip to Israel as a defining moment for the senator's views on the Jewish State. Both John Dodd, Helms's former fundraising aide, and Danielle Pletka, Helms's policy director on Middle East affairs, recalled the significance of Helms's visit.⁹ "I think that the trip had a major impact on him," Dodd argued. "It was a spiritual connection, but I think that it was on an intellectual level, too . . . with what was going on in the Middle East."¹⁰ Historians Tom Packer and William A. Link both argue that the trip potentially altered Jesse Helms's outlook on the Israeli-Arab conflict.¹¹ This suggests that Helms reversed his views for personal reasons, rather than out of cynical political motives.

Still, scholars argue that other, more expressly political factors might have played a role in reshaping Helms's stance on Israel. In *Conservatives Look Abroad*, Packer offers several plausible explanations for Helms's abrupt reversal on matters related to Israel. Packer suggests that the decline of the Soviet Union's influence in the Middle East may have prompted Helms to shift his focus within the region from combating communism to suppressing leftist terrorist activities, aligning his goals directly with those of Israel. Packer also points out that Helms may have developed greater sympathies for the Jewish State following the rightward movement of Israeli politics in the 1980s. Indeed, the American and Israeli conservative movements had more than just an ideological affinity; Israel's conservative Likud Party under Prime Minister Menachem Begin actively cultivated contacts with leaders of America's

8. Scholars of late-twentieth-century conservatism generally view the movement's foreign policy doctrine as framed largely by the politics of the Cold War. Historian Alan Brinkley, for example, argues that the movement was born from the anticommunist campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s, while Jonathan Schoenwald portrays late-twentieth-century conservatism as a fluctuating ideological fusion of "traditionalism, libertarianism, and anticommunism." Although these scholars address conservatism and foreign policy to a limited degree, none has addressed Zionism as a competing element within the conservative movement. See Jonathan M. Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), and Alan Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (April 1994): 409-429.

9. Danielle Pletka, interview with Tom Packer, January 10, 2008, quoted in Packer, "Conservatives Look Abroad," 42.

10. John Dodd, interview, with author, November 22, 2016, Jesse Helms Center, Wingate, North Carolina (hereinafter Dodd interview).

11. Packer, "Conservatives Look Abroad," 42.

Christian Right.¹² Helms's trip to Israel and subsequent policy shift in 1985 can thus be understood as the result of these connections, as leading American and Israeli conservative figures played an active role in organizing Helms's Holy Land pilgrimage.

Helms scholars also argue that the senator's tough 1984 reelection struggle might have influenced Helms's foreign policy reversal. These authors assume that Helms's political motivations stemmed from popular pressure. Historian Link, for example, notes that Helms shifted his views after being accused publicly during the campaign of the worst "anti-Israel record of any member of the U.S. Senate."¹³ Journalist Ernest B. Furgurson, meanwhile, argues that frustrations within the North Carolina Jewish community prompted the senator to change his views that year.¹⁴ Only Packer argues for a different form of electoral pressure, suggesting that campaign finance liabilities might have played a role.¹⁵ In all cases, explanations for the senator's shift are brief and underdeveloped, filling no more than a half page in often exhaustive works on Helms's career.

By focusing primarily on Helms's position on Israel, this article seeks to provide a more definitive explanation for the senator's rapid shift from an anti- to pro-Israel stance than can be found in the existing literature. Despite most historians' previous assertions, a range of secondary sources, interview materials, and archival documents suggest that Jesse Helms adopted a more pro-Israel foreign policy principally in response to fundraising concerns during and after the 1984 Senate campaign, when he ran against Democratic governor James B. Hunt Jr. Hunt's ability to remain competitive against Helms in fundraising with the help of pro-Israel groups compelled the senator to recalibrate his stance on Israel-related issues. While evangelicals strongly influenced Helms's policy transition, his effort to garner the financial support of pro-Israel fundraising groups for his own political organization emerges as a central motivation in the senator's political conversion to a staunchly pro-Israel stance. Given Helms's preeminent role in shaping modern conservative foreign policy, his response to pro-Israel interest groups indicates that conservative Zionism might have derived not from internal movement activism and ideas but from interest groups outside the conservative coalition.



Long before his days in the Senate, Helms distinguished himself as North Carolina's most unabashed conservative icon. As a Raleigh-based television editorialist in the 1960s, Helms developed a considerable political following in the

12. *Ibid.*, 55–56.

13. Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 319.

14. Ernest B. Furgurson, *Hard Right: The Rise of Jesse Helms* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1986), 197.

15. Packer, "Conservatives Look Abroad," 55.

eastern part of the state through his critique of the contemporary cultural changes wrought by desegregation and the so-called sexual revolution. Ever a defender of the status quo, Helms opposed *Brown v. Board of Education's* attempt to force desegregation of schools and railed against secularization in public life.¹⁶ In time, Helms's reputation for opposition earned him broad support from Americans who felt discomfited with the pace of social change.

While Helms's views on Israel and other foreign policy issues were broadcast infrequently during this period, the future senator did strongly criticize the Jewish State and the pro-Israel political consensus of his future colleagues. In a 1970 broadcast on WRAL TV in Raleigh, Helms criticized international support for Israel throughout Israel's continual conflict with the Arab states and questioned the legitimacy of Israel's modern foundation:

The anger, the resentment of the Arabs is being laid aside by the news media as being unreasonable and unjustified. It is seldom if ever mentioned that the existing political entity, known as Israel, was created with force and deprivation. . . . The world has since listened only to the Israelis. Clearly, that is where the world's sympathy is supposed to lie, if one is to believe the politicians and the news media. A substantial percentage of the world's population of today has no knowledge . . . of the circumstances of the "re-establishment" of Israel in 1948.¹⁷

Helms clearly viewed Israel unfavorably. Speaking as a private citizen in 1970, he revealed not just his underlying skepticism of Israel's actions but also a more fundamental antipathy toward the Zionist project.

Helms's entry to the U.S. Senate in 1973 coincided with the high point of conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors.¹⁸ The conflict, commonly known as the Yom Kippur War, raged from October 6 until October 25 and led to powerful "anti-Soviet, pro-Israeli congressional emotions" in its aftermath.¹⁹ In spite of the prevailing sentiment, Helms staked out a remarkably critical position toward Israel before the conflict had even officially ended. On October 23, Helms introduced a Senate resolution that called on Israel to return the West Bank to Jordan, declaring that "territories which Israel seized by force of arms must be given back to the nations from which they were wrested."²⁰ Coming on the heels of a surprise attack against

16. Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 6.

17. Quoted in Mark I. Pinsky, "Another Jesse with a Jewish Problem," *North Carolina Independent*, March 16–29, 1984.

18. Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991).

19. "The 1973 Arab-Israeli War," U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/1973/1973-10-06>; "Foreign Policy 1973: Overview," in *Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1973*, 29th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1974), 791–794, <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/cqal73-1227627>.

20. 125 Cong. Rec. S34808 (1973).

Israel, Helms's proposal appeared strikingly antagonistic toward the embattled Jewish State. As the political fallout grew against those hostile to Israel, however, Helms did not renege on his position. In December of that year, the freshman senator again stood out as one of just nine of his colleagues to vote against the Israeli Emergency Assistance Act, which provided approximately \$2.2 billion in security and military aid for the Israelis.²¹ By the end of his first year as senator, Jesse Helms had established himself as one of Israel's most outspoken congressional critics.

Helms remained hostile to Israeli interests over the course of the decade. In 1975, he voted against implementing a key portion of the Israeli-Egyptian Sinai Agreement that required Americans to monitor Egyptian operations within parts of the peninsula.²² In 1975 and 1976, Helms opposed foreign aid bills directing funds to Israel.²³ Helms was the only senator in 1977 to oppose a bill barring American companies from participating in the Arab boycott on Israel and further distinguished himself in 1979 as the only member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to oppose President Jimmy Carter's \$4.8 billion foreign aid request for Israel and Egypt. During committee deliberations, Helms attempted to insert amended language denying foreign aid to nations that had failed to ratify the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—an agreement that neither Egypt nor Israel had signed. Helms also took the opportunity to proclaim that the United States ought to place pressure on the Israelis to cede all land occupied by Israel since the 1967 War. According to Helms, contested territories like the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip would “cease to be problems” if properly returned to their pre-1967 rulers. Helms's amendment failed in committee, yet he raised it again on the Senate floor in a final, unsuccessful effort to effectively kill the foreign aid bill.²⁴ Helms used Senate floor debate to levy further criticism of the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement, in which he described the Israelis as being “buoyed by the thrill of conquest” and urged the United States to pressure Israel to return the occupied territories to their pre-1967 rulers. “We must confront the serious question of whether the United States can allow itself the luxury of

21. “Aid to Israel Legislation Sails through Congress,” in *Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1973*, 862–866, <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/cqal73-1227756>.

22. “U.S. Participation in Sinai Accord Approved,” in *Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1975*, 31st ed. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1976), 344–349, <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/cqal75-1214166>.

23. “H.R. 9005. Foreign Economic Aid Authorization,” *Congressional Quarterly 1975* (November 5, 1975), 70-S.; “H.R. 12203. Foreign Aid Appropriations, Fiscal 1976,” *Congressional Quarterly 1976* (March 23, 1976), 13-S.

24. “H.R. 5840 Export Administration/Arab Boycott,” *Congressional Quarterly 1977* (May 5, 1977), 22-S.; “Aid Package for Egypt, Israel,” in *Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1979*, 35th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1980), 137–141, <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/cqal79-1184545>.

upholding the Israeli conquests of 1967," Helms insisted. In the end, Helms was one of only eleven senators to vote against the foreign aid package.²⁵

As Helms gained seniority in the Senate, his position on Israel hardened. In the early 1980s, he openly advocated cutting off economic aid to Israel unless the state halted settlement construction in the West Bank.²⁶ The senator went one step further in 1982 after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, claiming that Israeli officials had "made a palatable character out of [PLO leader Yasser] Arafat" and advocating that the United States "just shut off relations" with Israel until Prime Minister Menachem Begin agreed to a cease-fire. Helms's tough position came just as public opinion began shifting in Israel's favor and American evangelicals became increasingly interested in preserving the Jewish State. These developments made the conservative senator ever more the outlier on issues relating to Israel and its Arab adversaries.²⁷

Helms's hostility to Israel not only ran counter to the consensus in Washington but also of American opinions overall. In 1974—just one year after Helms's entry into the Senate—a Harris Poll found that over 77 percent of respondents nationwide understood Israel to be a "friend" or "close ally" of the United States. In both 1974 and 1975, 65 percent of respondents favored sending military aid to Israel in the event of another Arab attack, with between just 25.3 percent and 24.5 percent opposed in 1974 and 1975, respectively. When asked which side respondents would sympathize with more in the event of another Israeli-Palestinian conflict, over a third of national respondents reported that they would empathize most with the Israelis, whereas only 15 percent of all Americans said they would sympathize with the Palestinians. Americans' sympathy for Israel only increased over the course of the 1970s, with the proportion of respondents sympathetic to Israel rising from 35 percent in 1974 to 38 percent in 1975 and 47 percent in 1980.²⁸

Increased American support for Israel was driven primarily by two major constituencies within the United States: Jewish Americans and Protestant evangelicals. Prior to 1967, Orthodox and Reform communities in the United States largely shunned the notion of constructing a Jewish State in the Middle East, preferring instead to focus their attention on the greater Jewish diaspora in

25. 125 Cong. Rec. S10834 (1979); "Aid Package for Egypt, Israel," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 1979, 137–141.

26. "Aid Package for Egypt, Israel," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 1979, 137–141.

27. "A Reluctant Congress Adopts Lebanon Policy," in *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 1983, 39th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1984), 113–123, <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/cqal83-1198422>.

28. Louis Harris and Associates, 2007, "Harris 1974 Middle East and Anti-Semitism Survey, study no. 2437," UNC Dataverse, V1, <https://hdl.handle.net/1902.29/H-2437>; Harris and Associates, 2007, "Harris 1975 Middle East and Anti-Semitism Survey, study no. 2530," UNC Dataverse, V1, <https://hdl.handle.net/1902.29/H-2530>; Harris and Associates, Seagram Company, and World Jewish Congress, 1984, "Harris 1980 Arab-Israeli Conflict Survey, study no. 804011," UNC Dataverse, V1, <https://hdl.handle.net/1902.29/H-804011>.

the aftermath of the Holocaust. However, Israel's stunning victory in both the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars provoked a communal reconceptualization of the Jewish State, causing many American Jews to begin looking toward Israel with a new sense of cultural pride. At the same time, the attacks created a new source of communal insecurity by reminding American Jewry of the continued existential threat posed by anti-Semitism. This concern drove many Jewish Americans to take a deeper interest in Israeli security, and the issue quickly emerged as one of the community's top policy priorities. Among other things, American Jews' growing interest in Israeli security led to greater pro-Israel lobbying activity, spurring a dramatic rise in donations and grassroots activism.²⁹ Flush with new donations, lobbying groups such as the Anti-Defamation League began redirecting a portion of their resources to fund pro-Israel lobbying activity for the first time.³⁰

Of all these organizations, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), America's largest pro-Israel activist group, experienced the largest funding increase after the Six Day War. Unlike other lobbying groups founded by and for American Jewry, AIPAC dealt exclusively with the issue of U.S. support for Israel. Because AIPAC focused on foreign policy, rather than domestic issues, neither end of the political spectrum could lay claim to the organization, allowing it to maintain a base level of influence across multiple American and Israeli administrations. AIPAC's bipartisan credentials proved especially helpful in 1977, when Israel's first conservative Likud Party prime minister, Menachem Begin, shunned established, traditionally liberal Jewish lobbying groups in favor of AIPAC as his principal point of contact with pro-Israel activists in the United States. Begin's decision elevated AIPAC to new prominence within the Washington lobbying community, a position the committee then leveraged to play a leading role in opposing President Reagan's high-profile 1981 sale of F-15 aircraft to Saudi Arabia.³¹ While the Saudi arms deal ultimately went forward, AIPAC's initial success in lobbying Capitol Hill against the sale raised the group's national profile and helped to feed perceptions of AIPAC's growing Washington influence. By the mid-1980s, advocates for Israeli security had achieved considerable influence in Washington. In so doing, lobbyists empowered Israel and its supporters with a newly effective voice and pressured American politicians to further prioritize Israel's security.

29. Dov Waxman, "The Pro-Israel Lobby in the United States: Past, Present, and Future," in *Israel and the United States: Six Decades of US-Israeli Relations*, ed. Robert O. Freedman (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2012), 86.

30. *Ibid.*, 87.

31. Michael Thomas, *American Policy toward Israel: The Power and Limits of Beliefs* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 40; David Howard Goldberg, *Foreign Policy and Ethnic Interest Groups: American and Canadian Jews Lobby for Israel* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

To Helms, AIPAC and other pro-Israel interest groups undermined attempts at a more pragmatic, clear-eyed foreign policy doctrine in the Middle East. Helms resented the Israel lobby's growing influence over congressional policymakers as Cold War tensions rose during the 1970s. Remarking to one constituent in 1975 about his refusal to sign a petition urging President Gerald Ford to support Israeli military aid, Helms wrote, "From a logical standpoint the letter was stupid, and even dangerous. But it is the measurement of the strength of a certain lobby."³² During the Israeli invasion of Lebanon years later, Helms referenced the allegedly outsized influence of pro-Israel groups, saying that his proposal to cut ties with Israel would "send shudders through that lobby that's so powerful in this city."³³ By casting AIPAC and its allies as a "powerful" and potentially "dangerous" special interest, Helms soon emerged as one of the organization's staunchest Washington antagonists.

Ironically, however, rising pro-Israel activism by American Jews coincided with a similar surge in activism from the Christian Right. Before the 1970s, most evangelicals had maintained the position that religious leaders ought to refrain from politics and engage only in matters of spirit. As the decade began, however, court rulings allowing abortion and outlawing segregated private schools sensitized conservative evangelicals to the supposed "secularization" of American culture and politics.³⁴ Televangelist figures such as the Reverends Jerry Falwell Sr. and Pat Robertson and conservative political activist Paul Weyrich spoke out more frequently on political topics and employed their extensive national followings to gather supporters. These developments fueled a more unified conservative coalition centered around activist groups like Falwell's own Moral Majority.

At the same time, American evangelicals began taking an increasing interest in Israeli security concerns.³⁵ Galvanized first by the 1967 war, many evangelicals saw Israel's miraculous victory as a sign of Christ's Second Coming as outlined in the Book of Revelation.³⁶ Shortly after the conflict, Falwell proclaimed that Israel could have won the war only "with the intervention of God Almighty," and he became an active Christian Zionist.³⁷ Other evangelical leaders soon followed suit,

32. Jesse Helms to Bernard A. Harrell, June 12, 1975, "Issue Correspondence," box 1818, folder 14 "Israel, 1975," Helms Papers.

33. Sen. Jesse Helms, interview, *Newsmaker Sunday*, Fox TV, August 7, 1982.

34. Neil Rubin, "The Relationship between American Evangelical Christians and the State of Israel," in Freedman, *Israel and the United States*, 234; Flippen, *Jimmy Carter, the Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right*, 50–51.

35. Yacov Ariel, *Philosemites or Antisemites? Evangelical Christian Attitudes toward Jews, Judaism, and the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, 2002), 18.

36. Noam Kochavi, *Nixon and Israel: Forging a Conservative Partnership* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2009), 23.

37. Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics: The Secret Alliance between Israel and the U.S. Christian Right* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1986), 72–79.



In the spring of 1979, Helms lent early support to pastor Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. Falwell, a televangelist and the founder of Liberty University, played a defining role in reshaping the late-twentieth-century conservative movement. Shortly after Israel's victory in the 1967 war, Falwell became an active Christian Zionist. Photograph from Wikimedia Commons.

as did a number of conservative Christian magazines and literary authors, who drew similar links between Israel's victory and the coming End Times.³⁸ Evangelicals' eschatological associations with Israel quickly translated into fervent Christian Zionism, with community leaders like Falwell calling on followers to "mak[e] the commitment to support the State of Israel."³⁹

38. Ibid.; Eric R. Crouse, *American Christian Support for Israel: Standing with the Chosen People, 1948-1975* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2015), 96, 102; Rubin, "The Relationship between American Evangelical Christians and the State of Israel," in Freedman, *Israel and the United States*, 239.

39. Flippen, *Jimmy Carter, the Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right*, 229.

Unlike American Jewry, Protestant evangelical communities were concentrated principally in the rural South and constituted a large share of Helms's conservative electoral base.⁴⁰ Changes in evangelical opinion on Israel were reflected in shifting results of regionally-based opinion polls, which indicated that southerners increasingly supported the Jewish State relative to other Americans over the course of the late 1970s.⁴¹ Also, unlike the Jewish community, evangelical leadership enjoyed close ties with Helms and his campaign since his first run for Senate in 1972. Indeed, Helms owed his election in large part to a devoted following of North Carolina evangelicals, who lauded him as a champion of religious values in Washington. Nevertheless, North Carolina's conservative firebrand maintained a uniquely antagonistic stance toward the Jewish State, along with a special disdain for the role of pro-Israel interest groups in Washington. Helms went so far in some circles as to prompt charges of anti-Semitism, with at least one North Carolina rabbi claiming to have "no doubts" as to Helms's underlying bigotry toward Jews.⁴² As the 1980s began, therefore, Helms's critical approach to Israel differed drastically, not just from national consensus but also from the views of his own, increasingly pro-Israel base of support.



Jesse Helms's campaign operation was put to the test in 1984, when Helms faced the most difficult electoral run of his entire political career. In January of that year, Jim Hunt, the sitting Democratic governor of North Carolina, announced his intention to challenge Helms for the Senate during the 1984 presidential election. As North Carolina's first governor to serve consecutive four-year terms, Hunt enjoyed tremendous popularity heading into the campaign. In 1982, Hunt registered a nearly 70 percent favorable rating, with just 20 percent unfavorable, compared with Helms's 40 percent favorable, 30 percent unfavorable. Hunt had also improved schools and attracted businesses to North Carolina, adding to his popularity.⁴³ In addition, Hunt's partisan label offered him an edge within the

40. Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 295.

41. Harris and Associates, "Harris 1974 Middle East and Anti-Semitism Survey"; "Harris 1975 Middle East and Anti-Semitism Survey"; "Harris 1980 Arab-Israeli Conflict Survey."

42. "Election 1984—Words from Boone, NC," *American Jewish Times Outlook*, May 5, 1984. Given Helms's hostility toward Israel and Zionism generally, it is not difficult to imagine that Helms was anti-Semitic. Indeed, other prominent North Carolina conservatives of the 1970s—including the Reverend Billy Graham, a friend of Helms—shared and expressed anti-Semitic views. Political and religious leaders often vastly overstated the extent of Jewish power and influence in politics as a means of justifying prejudice, mirroring Helms's own views on the power and influence of Washington's pro-Israel lobby. No concrete evidence to date either proves or refutes these allegations of anti-Semitism, which have dogged Helms since the early days of his political career.

43. William D. Snider, *Helms and Hunt: The North Carolina Senate Race, 1984* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 44–46.



Helms adopted a more pro-Israel foreign policy principally in response to fundraising concerns during and after the 1984 Senate campaign, when he ran against Democratic governor James B. Hunt Jr. Hunt enjoyed tremendous popularity heading into the campaign, but by the spring of 1984, both candidates were locked in a virtual dead heat. Photograph of Hunt and Helms attending a debate, July 29, 1984, © *Raleigh News and Observer*, courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh.

traditionally Democratic Tar Heel State; prior to Helms's own 1972 campaign, no Republican had won election for U.S. Senate in North Carolina since the nineteenth century. Together, these factors made Governor Hunt's advantage clear before he even launched his campaign. In 1983, Hunt boasted a twenty-point lead against Helms, according to internal polling.⁴⁴ "Barring an act of God, Helms can't win," Richard Whittle wrote for the *Los Angeles Times-Washington Post News Service*. "The roar of the battle indeed promises to be titanic. But if the volume implied doubt about the outcome, it shouldn't. It's all over but the shouting."⁴⁵

With a daunting reelection campaign ahead, Helms committed the North Carolina Congressional Club to a "massive media-driven campaign" to improve Helms's favorability ratings and to launch a relentless smear campaign against Governor Hunt. Beginning in April 1983, the senator's campaign ran ads in 150 small-town newspapers and aired radio messages on seventy-two radio stations across the state at an average of three times per day. Spending nearly \$20,000 each week

44. Dodd interview.

45. Snider, *Helms and Hunt*, 117.

on advertising alone, the Helms campaign broadcast its message nearly fourteen thousand times in April and June throughout rural and suburban areas of the state. All told, Helms spent over \$697,000 by the end of that summer on advertising, including 3,937 ads in 167 local papers, 353 commercials on fifteen television stations, and 25,542 radio advertisements. Advertising spending only increased as the year wore on, rising to \$50,000 per week by the end of 1983. By fall of that year, Helms's advertising campaign began to bear fruit in the polls; by October, Hunt's previously astronomical lead in the poll had shrunk to just six percentage points, and by spring of 1984 both candidates were locked in a virtual dead heat.⁴⁶

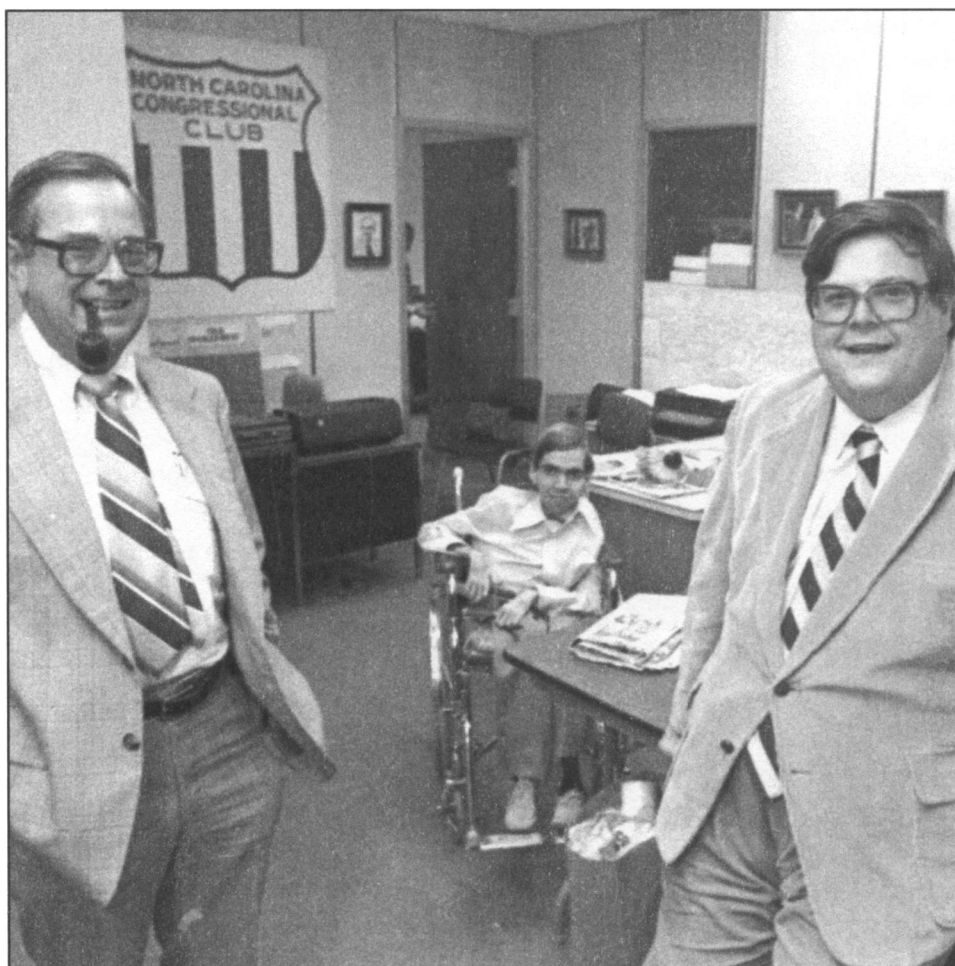
Helms's expensive media campaign was made possible by the senator's unmatched nationwide fundraising operation. Shortly before arriving at the Senate in 1972, Helms and his close aide Tom Ellis began to construct an extensive national fundraising network that became known as the North Carolina Congressional Club. By pioneering the use of direct mail for fundraising campaigns, Helms and his allies raised hundreds of thousands of dollars and amassed a list of over 200,000 faithful conservative donors from around the country. By 1980, the North Carolina Congressional Club had become the nation's largest political action committee, allowing Helms not only to outraise his opponents but also to support conservative candidates across the country and thus cultivate a conservative political alliance.⁴⁷

As spending increased on both sides of the 1984 campaign, however, Hunt's campaign began to assemble its own ambitious fundraising operation to counter the Helms machine. Having raised just \$1.04 million in 1983, Hunt tapped into a national campaign network of Democratic donors to raise another roughly \$4 million by mid-1984. While Hunt's fundraising by no means matched Helms's record-breaking 8.42-million-dollar haul, the governor's campaign surpassed all previous fundraising records in North Carolina, besides the Helms operation itself. As the campaign neared its final weeks, a flood of out-of-state money streamed into Hunt campaign coffers, such that the campaign "couldn't spend it fast enough" and ended up finishing the race with nearly \$1 million in cash on hand. Hunt's late fundraising success enabled him to run a competitive ad campaign against Helms during the last five weeks of the election; an astounding 2,536 television ads countered Helms's unprecedented 5,259. Hunt raised a total of \$10,030,304 by the end of 1984—the most of any nonincumbent Senate candidate in the country, and third-most of any candidate overall. Despite this feat, Hunt was unable to defeat Helms in the general election. Losing by just 87,000 votes, however, Hunt demonstrated that Helms's fundraising prowess could, in fact, be rivaled.⁴⁸

46. *Ibid.*, 117, 272–274. Helms's \$20,000 weekly spending spree is equivalent to \$117,000 per week in today's dollars.

47. Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 9, 144, 146, 201.

48. Dodd interview; Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 140, 302–303; Virginia Sassaman, "1984 Senate Candidates



Shortly before his election to the Senate in 1972, Helms and his close aide Tom Ellis began to construct an extensive national fundraising network that became known as the North Carolina Congressional Club. By 1980, it had become the nation's largest political action committee, enabling Helms not only to outraise his opponents but also to support conservative candidates across the country. Tom Ellis (left), campaign volunteer Bob Harris, and Carter Wrenn (right) at the National Congressional Club Office, November 12, 1979, © Raleigh News and Observer, courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

Raised \$146 Million, Spent \$137 Million, and Received \$28 Million From PACs, Common Cause Study Shows," *Common Cause Newsletter*, March 14, 1985, in "1984 Senate Race, 1983-1985," folder 23, Ernest B. Furgurson Papers #4912, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Pro-Israel political action committees constituted a critical share of Governor Hunt's 1984 contribution surge. By July 15, pro-Israel PACs had given over \$130,000 to boost the governor's campaign, making Hunt the third-highest recipient of pro-Israel PAC funds of any candidate in the 1984 election cycle.⁴⁹ Contributions from pro-Israel groups amounted to over 30 percent of all PAC donations to Hunt's Senate campaign, a surprising figure considering that North Carolina's Jewish community numbered no more than twenty thousand in 1984.⁵⁰ As impressive as these numbers were on their own, individual Jewish donors from out of state may have accounted for an even larger share of spending against the senator. According to John Dodd, Hunt likely accepted between \$2 and \$3 million in total contributions from the pro-Israel Jewish community.⁵¹ This would amount to between 20 percent and 30 percent of all fundraising on the part of the Hunt campaign—a critical sum in maintaining Hunt's competitiveness with Helms, despite the incumbent senator's enormous fundraising advantage.

Unsurprisingly, pro-Israel groups' interest in the 1984 North Carolina Senate race stemmed directly from Helms's outlier position on Israel. "[Pro-Israel PAC officials] consider [Helms] both anti-Semitic and anti-Israel," one Washington reporter noted to the *Raleigh News and Observer*.⁵² In 1983, the *Long Island Jewish World* labeled Helms one of four senators facing reelection the following year that "stand out for their unusually hostile stance on issues of great concern to friends of Israel."⁵³ According to the *Los Angeles Jewish Community Bulletin*, Helms voted against Israeli interests on all twenty-five Senate votes "that had an impact on U.S.-Israel relations."⁵⁴ Taking note, Hunt's fundraising campaign made sure to exploit Jewish antipathy toward Helms. In April of 1984, Hunt's finance committee chair, Arthur Cassell, wrote a nationwide fundraising letter for Hunt claiming that "by any measure Jesse Helm had, by far, the worst anti-Israel record of any member of the U.S. Senate." Cassell pointed to Helms's record on several Senate votes, his criticism of the Camp David accords in 1979, and his calls to break diplomatic ties with Israel in 1982 as evidence of the senator's hostility to the Jewish State.⁵⁵ "I am out to defeat Jesse Helms for the same reasons you are," Cassell wrote in a second

49. "Hunt 3rd in Pro-Israel PAC Donations," *Raleigh News and Observer*, August 19, 1984, box 298, folder 13 "Campaign, Israel: 1984-1995," Helms Papers.

50. Pinsky, "Another Jesse with a Jewish Problem"; Edward Roeder, "Helms's Foes in Pro-Israel PACs Boost Hunts' Bid," *Greensboro News and Record*, August 19, 1984, box 298, folder 13 "Campaign, Israel: 1984-1995," Helms Papers.

51. Dodd interview.

52. "Hunt 3rd in Pro-Israel PAC Donations," *Raleigh News and Observer*, August 19, 1984.

53. Referenced in Murray Wood, "Anxious Eyes on Helms-Hunt Race," *Jewish Community Bulletin*, June 22, 1984.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Snider, *Helms and Hunt*, 131.

letter months later. "Because this man threatens everything you and I believe in: a decent, compassionate America, the separation of Church and State, a strong and secure Israel."⁵⁶ In a slightly less pointed letter to supporters, Hunt himself solicited donations by warning that Helms was "building this massive war chest" to fight "against things you and I care about . . . like the security and survival of Israel."⁵⁷

In an apparent effort to dull Hunt's fundraising ability, Helms appears to have preemptively shifted his opinion on certain issues regarding Israel. Shortly after Cassell's initial letter, Helms gave a speech before the Senate in May of 1984 advocating for the relocation of the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Helms also declared in the speech that the United States "should never pursue any plans that envision a separation of the West Bank from Israel."⁵⁸ The latter position conflicted directly with Helms's 1979 stance on the West Bank, and the Hunt campaign was quick to accuse Helms of flip-flopping on the issue.⁵⁹ While this particular aspect of the Israeli controversy factored minimally into the race itself, Helms's abrupt shift on the West Bank demonstrates how seriously Helms took the threat posed by pro-Israel campaign spending. Helms's move also marks the beginning of a broader shift toward Zionism, as he would become an increasingly outspoken advocate for Israel in the years following the campaign.

Fundraising was not the only factor that brought about Helms's shift in positions on Israel. Changes in constituent correspondence sent to Helms's Washington office in the early 1980s suggest a marked increase in support for Israel among North Carolinians—a fact that Helms undoubtedly took into consideration as he recalibrated his positions toward Israel. Demonstrating a stark increase in support for Israel from 1975, more than two-thirds of all the letters received by Helms on Israel-related matters in the early 1980s urged the senator to adopt a friendlier policy stance toward the Jewish State.⁶⁰ Many letters from this period also made pointed references to evangelical conceptions of the Second Coming to justify their calls to support Israel, revealing the profound influence of evangelical political activism in reshaping voter attitudes and enthusiasm surrounding the Jewish State. "I believe that the hour is now here that we as individuals either stand with God or we decide

56. Arthur Cassell to donors, August 31, 1984, box 298, folder 13 "Campaign, Israel: 1984–1995," Helms Papers.

57. Jim Hunt to supporters, 1984, box 298, folder 13 "Campaign, Israel: 1984–1995," Helms Papers.

58. Snider, *Helms and Hunt*, 131.

59. "Helms's Stands on Israel Spark Controversy," *Raleigh News and Observer*, June 7, 1984, box 298, folder 13 "Campaign, Israel: 1984–1995," Helms Papers.

60. "Issue Correspondence," box 2192, folder 2 "Israel, 1984," Helms Papers. The Helms Center has preserved a total of twelve constituent letters on American policy toward Israel from 1980 to 1984. In 1975, just 45 percent of all letters received by Senator Helms on Israel demonstrated favorable views of the Jewish State, while a majority of letters sent discouraged the senator from supporting either economic or military aid for Israel.

to stand against Him[,] and God Himself has chosen Jerusalem," Peggy Fields of High Point wrote on April 2, 1984, in a letter urging Senator Helms to support relocating the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem.⁶¹ Still other letters appear to have come from prayer groups and evangelical religious organizations, including one letter from the legislative director of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority.⁶² Clearly, North Carolina's evangelical community took great interest in Israel and its security and wanted their senator to share a similarly pro-Israel perspective.

However, because Helms was already popular with the evangelical movement, the senator's position on Israel mattered little when it came to swaying evangelical voters. While they might have been critical of his stance on Israel, most conservative Christians were committed Helms supporters, and they would not necessarily change their vote based on the Israel issue alone. Indeed, even as constituent letters urged the senator to support Israeli interests, many letter writers simultaneously indicated that they already supported Helms for reelection. "We are working hard to get you re-elected in this area," Peggy Fields added in her letter urging the senator to support embassy relocation to Jerusalem.⁶³ Writing on that same day from Thomasville, Elma Church also asked Helms to support relocating the embassy and concluded her letter by stating that she was "looking forward" to the senator's reelection.⁶⁴ By confirming their support for Helms, constituents implicitly indicated that the senator's position on embassy relocation would not determine their willingness to support him. Conservative Christian activists were predisposed to support Helms, and North Carolina chapters of the Moral Majority and Christian Action League actively coordinated and strategized with the senator's campaign.⁶⁵ Hence at all levels of political activism, evangelicals' established loyalty to the Helms campaign, derived principally from the senator's stance on social issues, meant that Helms could pursue his own unpopular position on Israel without risking the loss of his evangelical base. This fact not only explains why Helms neglected to embrace Christian Zionism earlier in his career, but also suggests that evangelical opinion likely played only a limited role in his eventual policy shift.⁶⁶

61. Peggy Fields to Jesse Helms, April 2, 1984, box 2192, folder 2 "Israel, 1984," Helms Papers.

62. Roy C. Jones to Jesse A. Helms, April 2, 1984, box 2192, folder 2 "Israel, 1984," Helms Papers.

63. Peggy Fields to Jesse Helms, April 2, 1984, box 2192, folder 2 "Israel, 1984," Helms Papers.

64. Elma Church to Jesse Helms, April 2, 1984, box 2192, folder 2 "Israel, 1984," Helms Papers.

65. So linked were Christian activists with Helms's 1984 campaign that their connection led to scandal. In August of that year, Coy C. Privette, executive director of the North Carolina-based Christian Action League, coordinated with Helms aide Robert Touchon to sell a mailing list of 1,852 North Carolina preachers and Sunday school superintendents to the senator's campaign. See Snider, *Helms and Hunt*, 289; Rob Christensen, "Baptist Activist Says He Sold Mailing List to Helms Group," *Raleigh News and Observer*, August 25, 1984; and Ginny Carroll, "Baptists Ban Use of Mailing List," *Raleigh News and Observer*, August 28, 1984.

66. The apparent lack of evangelical influence on Israeli policy runs counter to the arguments of other scholars on this subject. In *Prophecy and Politics*, scholar and activist Grace Halsell argues that the rise of America's Christian Right in the 1980s introduced Zionism to the conservative movement. Religious scholar

This is not to say that evangelical opinion was irrelevant to Helms's eventual decision to embrace Israel. If the evangelical movement had been more hostile toward the Jewish State, it is difficult to imagine how Helms could have flipped his stance during the 1984 reelection campaign without raising questions from his supporters. The rising support for Israel among evangelicals simply might have opened a path for Helms to transition by mitigating concerns that such a dramatic policy reversal would cost him credibility among members of his base. Still, Helms's need to raise money and appeal to fundraising groups likely played a more immediate role in prompting the senator to reevaluate his political position.

In assessing its narrow victory in November of 1984, the Helms campaign studied pro-Israel groups' role in the Senate race. As John Dodd recalled years later, Helms and his aides contacted those same Jewish activist groups and donors who had opposed him so vehemently. Helms's Agricultural Committee aide, Darryl Nirenberg, became crucial to this effort, as he was also a son-in-law of the newly elected Republican senator Chic Hecht of Nevada, who was Jewish. Upon arriving in Congress, the freshman senator from Nevada quickly formed a close working relationship with Helms. In exchange for support on the Agriculture Committee, Hecht "served as an intermediary for Sen. Helms to the pro-Israel community," connecting Helms to several Jewish fundraisers in New York and elsewhere.⁶⁷ Early in 1985, Hecht accompanied Helms to a private fundraising breakfast at the home of prominent Jewish political donor Zalmon Bernstein. Speaking to around forty high-profile Jewish donors, Helms presented himself as a staunch supporter of Israel. He explained to attendees that he had opposed foreign aid to Israel in the past only because the funds had been included in larger foreign aid packages that he opposed. Helms asserted that he wanted to incorporate Israeli foreign aid into defense authorization bills instead, which he argued constituted a more appropriate realm for Israeli aid spending to begin with. While the specifics of Helms's voting record might have conflicted with the senator's explanation, Helms managed to win over much of the crowd. As John Dodd recalls:

One woman who had given as much as one could give to Hunt [came] up to [Helms] and [said], "Senator, I didn't know anything about you; I didn't know any of this, and I'm so glad to hear it, and I'm so glad you won!"⁶⁸

Yacov Ariel echoes Halsell's argument in *Philosemites or Antisemites?* by attributing conservative politicians' embrace of Zionism to the growing influence of premillennialist evangelicals within the Republican Party. Tom Packer, too, points to this cause as important in facilitating Israel's relationship with American conservatives, although he also posits additional explanations. The Helms case thus challenges the credibility of these assertions concerning foreign policy, suggesting instead that special interest groups might be more influential.

67. Dodd interview.

68. Ibid.

Slowly but surely, Helms earned the support of Jewish activists and donors by convincing them that his voting record did not accurately reflect his commitment to Israel.

Helms and his aides began eyeing opportunities to connect the senator's fundraising machine with conservative American Jewry. Helms's own papers indicate that he attended multiple fundraising events for pro-Israel groups such as the Hudson Valley Political Action Committee (HUDVAC) in early 1985, with Sen. Chic Hecht serving as Helms's liaison.⁶⁹ Helms's public demonstrations of his pro-Israel foreign policy views helped to assuage the concerns of conservative Jews over donating to a candidate seen by some as anti-Semitic. Shortly after the *Washington Post* published an article detailing Helms's "turnabout" in his position on the West Bank,⁷⁰ Helms's Middle East policy director, Jim Lucier, shot off a telling message to Darryl Nirenberg about fundraising, along with a copy of the article, saying:

This is a great item. . . . In case it hasn't been suggested, do you think we should send someone down to the FEC to put together a list of all contributors to Hunt, Boschwitz and Simon, and have Americans for a Safe Israel send them a fundraising letter using the enclosed clipping? . . . This may reduce the amount that Hunt can round up next year, and also identify for us Conservative Jews who would be giving to our folks instead of liberals down at AIPAC.⁷¹

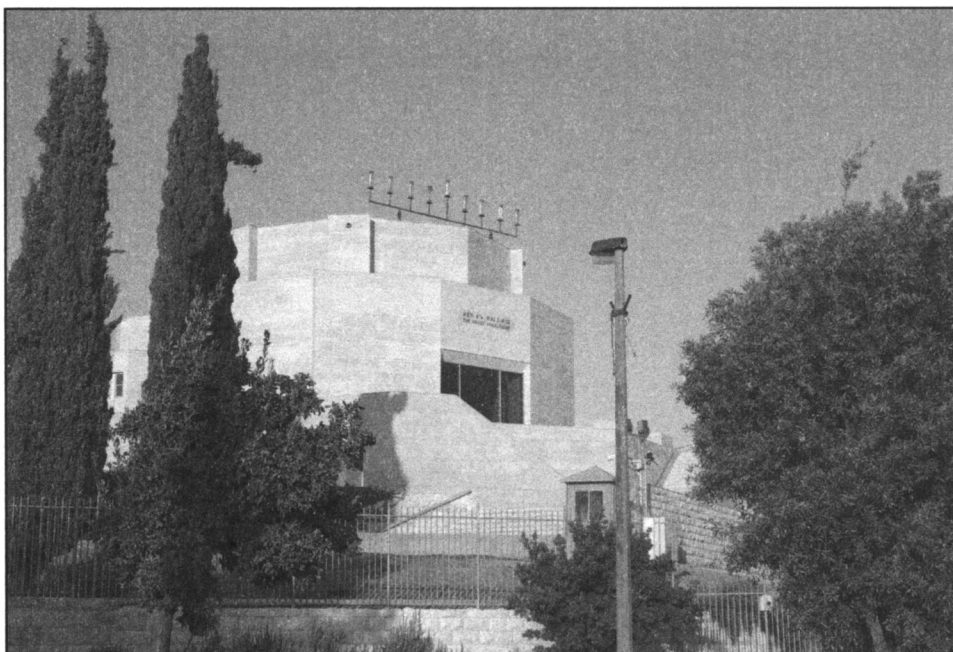
After his community debut at Zalmon Bernstein's house, Helms attended other fundraising events geared toward garnering the support of New York's conservative Jewish community, and Hecht began providing Helms with large attendee lists for the events. By mid-1985, Helms's quest had changed. Rather than simply limiting the fundraising success of any future Democratic opponents, Helms sought to exploit his shift on Israel to bring a new wealthy, traditionally Democratic donor class into the conservative fold, just as he had done with many southern Democrats through the establishment of the Congressional Club in 1973.

To complete his political conversion, however, Helms needed a significant, highly visible event that would allow him to explain his dramatic shift on Israel to wider audiences. That moment came in August of 1985, when Senator Helms embarked on a journey to Israel with Senator Hecht and his brother Marty to commemorate a new synagogue built in the Hecht family's honor. Helms and the Hechts charted their journey "in the footsteps of the patriarchs," beginning in Hebron and winding north through the holy cities of Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Shiloh. A devout Baptist,

69. Newsletter pamphlet, box 298, folder 13 "Campaign, Israel: 1984-1995," Helms Papers.

70. David B. Ottaway, "Sen. Helms, in Turnabout on Israel, Backs Continued Occupation of Lands," *Washington Post*, March 8, 1985.

71. Telegram, March 8, 1985, box 298, folder 13 "Campaign, Israel: 1984-1995," Helms Papers.



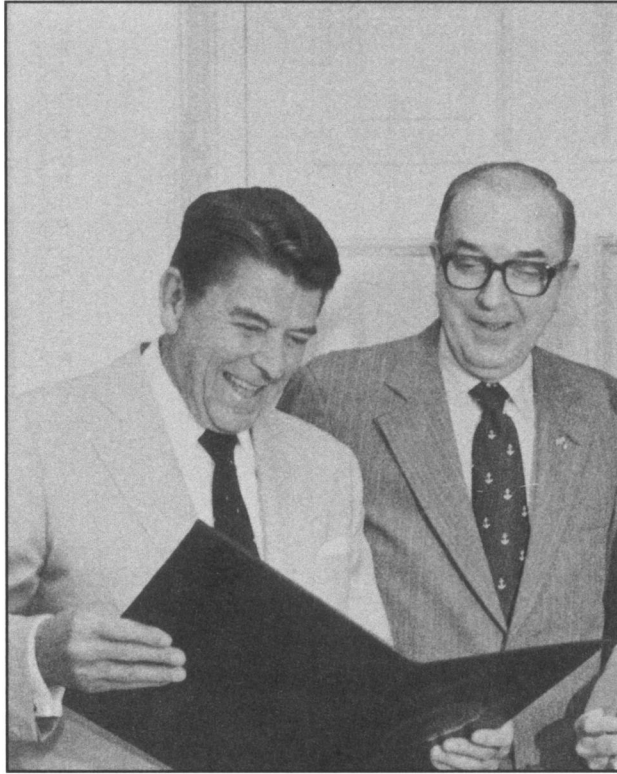
Helms gradually earned the support of Jewish activists and donors by convincing them that his voting record did not accurately reflect his commitment to Israel. To explain his dramatic shift on Israel to wider audiences Helms traveled to Israel with Sen. Chic Hecht and his brother Marty to commemorate a new synagogue built in the Hecht family's honor. Photograph of the Hecht Synagogue at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem by Berthold Werner, September 19, 2010, Wikimedia Commons.

Helms did not lose sight of these locations' spiritual significance. "I wish that every senator could see Israel in the way that Chic Hecht, Marty Hecht, and I saw Israel," Helms later remarked. "This area called the West Bank is the very heart of ancient Israel, the very land that the Bible is all about."⁷² In Jerusalem, Helms hosted a press conference in which he deemed Israel "the only reliable ally we have in this area which is anti-communist, with impeccable moral principles."⁷³ In an article published shortly after his visit, Helms would turn his praise of the Holy Land into a biting policy critique grounded in religious sentiment: "It is ironic that modern Israel is crammed along the seashore . . . while biblical Israel, the homeland of the Jews, is the very territory which the U.S. State Department wants the Jews to leave."⁷⁴

72. Jesse Helms, "Keeping Faith: A Baptist Deacon Reflects on American Policy toward Israel," *Policy Review* 35 (Winter 1985): 26.

73. A. L. May, "Helms's Action Shows Lift towards Israel," *Raleigh News and Observer*, October 20, 1985, in Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 318.

74. Helms, "Keeping Faith," 28.



On March 6, 1985, Helms joined seven other Republican senators in a letter attacking President Ronald Reagan's 1982 Middle East peace initiative and urged him to support continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Helms and President Reagan during Helms's reelection campaign for the U.S. Senate in 1984. State Archives of North Carolina.

Helms's rhetoric, which argued forcefully for preserving Israel's existing territorial boundaries, contrasted sharply with his language on the Senate floor years earlier.

Helms's rhetoric began translating into legislative action. On March 6, 1985, Helms joined seven other Republican senators in a letter attacking President Reagan's 1982 Middle East peace initiative and urging the president to support continued Israeli occupation of West Bank and Gaza. "We cannot support any plan which envisions an Israel that is only nine miles wide in the center," the letter read.⁷⁵ In August of that year, Helms made yet another departure from previous practice by backing an Israeli-American military aid deal involving the installation of airstrips and increased military cooperation between the two countries.⁷⁶

75. Helms et al. to President Ronald Reagan, March 6, 1985, box 298, folder 13 "Campaign, Israel: 1984-1995," Helms Papers.

76. Michael Yudelman, "Defense Agreement Favored by Helms," *Jerusalem Post*, August 12, 1985.

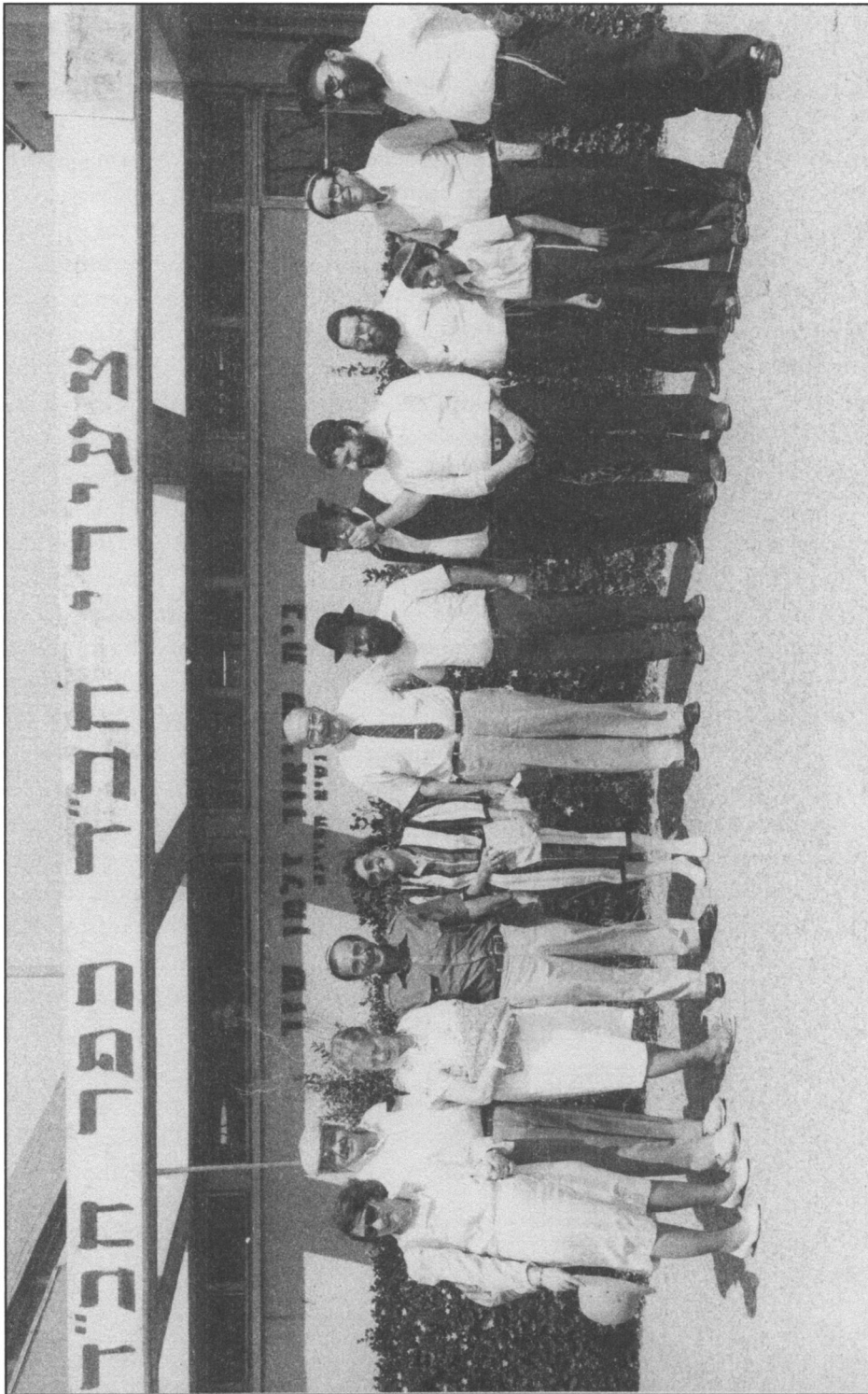
Jewish activists in both the United States and Israel took note of these charges. "We applaud Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., for his born-again Zionism," the *Jewish Week* editorial board wrote in September 1985.⁷⁷ "Sen. Jesse Helms . . . has been expressing an increased concern for Israeli security," one HUDVAC newsletter noted in June of that year.⁷⁸ In January 1986, Helms was asked to speak before the National Jewish Coalition—an invitation that would have been unthinkable just two years earlier. In less than a year and a half, Helms's strategic shift on Israel had begun to pay off with positive attention pouring in from a new set of enthusiastic conservative donors.

Jesse Helms's swift embrace of Zionism during and after the 1984 campaign is striking for several reasons. While Helms's aides continue to argue that the senator changed his position as part of a spiritual reawakening experienced in Israel, the fact that Helms's shift began an entire year before his trip challenges the credibility of this argument. Rather, it seems that the embattled senator's concerns over Jewish and pro-Israel donations to his opponent provided the primary impetus for his reversal on Israel. Pro-Israel activist fundraising threatened to rival—perhaps even topple—the immense fundraising machine into which Helms had poured so much time and effort over the years, and which had become so vital to his continuing electoral success and power within the conservative movement. As the nation's largest political action committee, the North Carolina Congressional Club typically afforded Helms a solid electoral bulwark against opponents in a traditionally Democratic state and enabled him to accumulate tremendous power in both Congress and the conservative movement. The pro-Israel lobby's successful fundraising campaign in 1984 thus struck at the very heart of Helms's power and influence. As a result, Helms and his aides reoriented the senator's position—not only mitigating the success of anti-Helms fundraising efforts, but also expanding the Helms fundraising machine into an untapped pool of Jewish donors. By the fall of 1985, Helms had not only drastically reformulated his position on Israel but had come to embrace the very community of lobbyists and donors he had once maligned. The policy reversal revealed that Helms—a man defined publicly by his ideological consistency and unalloyed conservatism—was willing to shift rapidly on the issues when confronted by new challenges to his power.

Beyond Helms himself, the senator's policy reversal reflects a much broader embrace of Israel by American conservatives. Through the 1980s, liberals long distinguished themselves as Congress's most committed defenders of the Jewish State, while conservatives often held a position of lukewarm indifference. Beginning in the late 1970s, however, conservatives increasingly began to take up the banner of

77. "Sen. Helms as 'Friend,'" *New York Jewish Week*, September 20, 1985.

78. Hudson Valley Political Action Committee Newsletter, June 1985, box 298, folder 15, Helms Papers.



Helms (sixth from left), with Dorothy Helms (third from left) and Sen. Chic Hecht (fourth from left) in Israel. Jesse Helms Center, reproduced by permission.



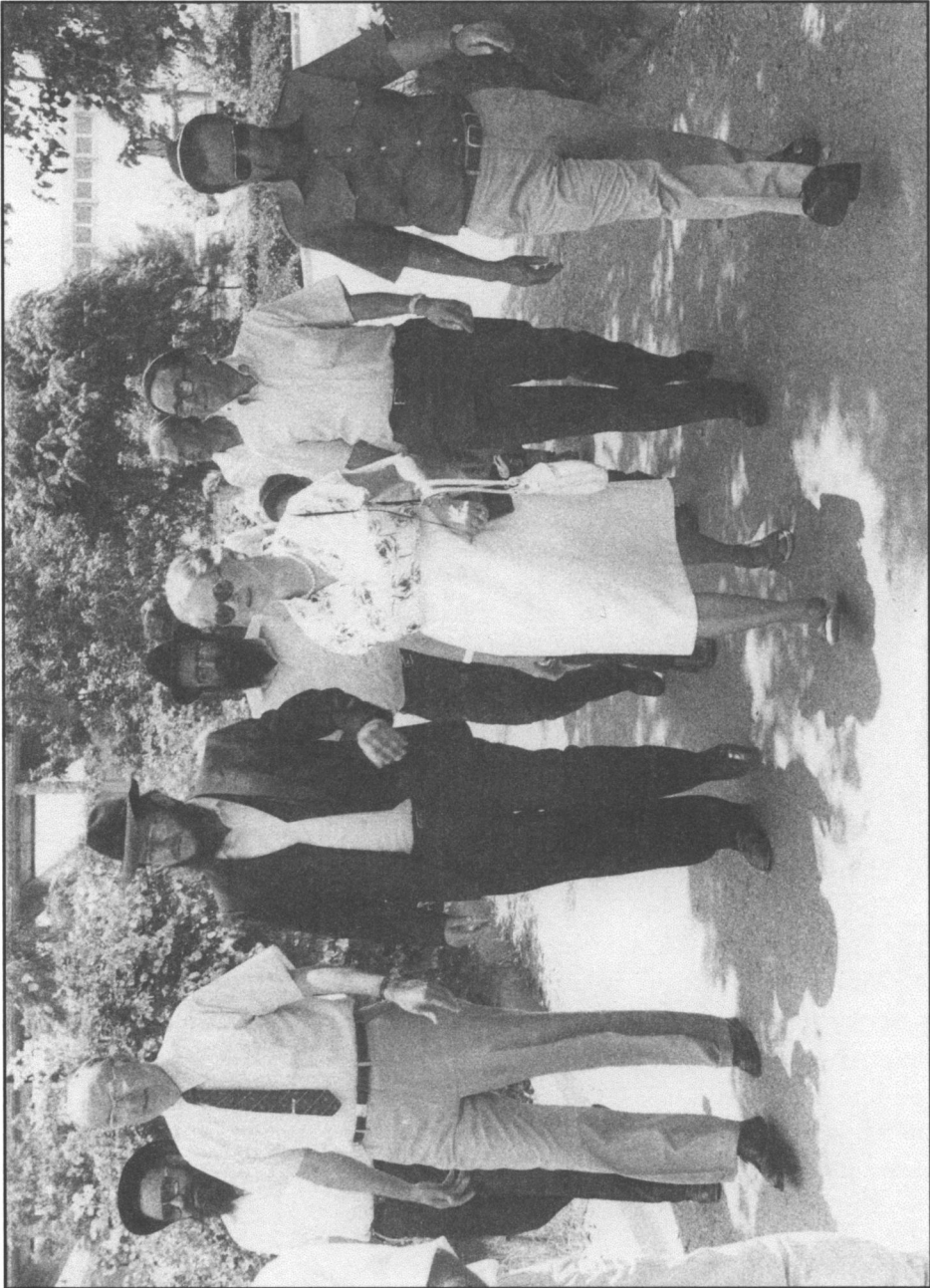
Helms in Israel. Jesse Helms Center, reproduced by permission.

Israeli security, and by the end of the century, American Zionism was more closely associated with the conservative movement than with modern liberalism.⁷⁹ Helms's quick reversal signaled the beginning of this trend and thus marked a turning point on Middle East foreign policy within the Republican Party.

To the extent that Helms's shift is reflective, his motives are illuminating. Many scholars have attributed conservatives' embrace of Israel in the late 1980s to the rise of the Christian Right, whose evangelical members formed the backbone of conservatism's grassroots resurgence at the end of the century.⁸⁰ However, Helms's political conversion speaks less to the influence of evangelical Christians than to the growing power of pro-Israel activist groups, as well as the increasing importance of money in electoral politics. Helms's case thus casts doubt on the role of movement conservatives in influencing not just his foreign policy positions but those of the movement generally.

79. Jacob Heilbrunn, "Can Peter Beinart Save Liberal Zionism?" *Atlantic Monthly*, March 9, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/can-peter-beinart-save-liberal-zionism/254256/>.

80. Ariel, *Philosemites or Antisemites?*, 16–18; Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics*, 149–160.



Helms (second from left) with Dorothy Helms (fifth from left) and Sen. Chic Hecht (right) in Israel. Jesse Helms Center, reproduced by permission.

Viewed from this perspective, Zionism's role in the evolution of modern conservatism defies the prevailing historiography of the movement. Throughout broader studies of postwar conservatism in the United States, scholars such as Jonathan Schoenwald, Alan Brinkley, and William Hixson portray a movement shaped from within by both grassroots and elite forces. According to Schoenwald, conservatives simultaneously "built a movement from the ground up," while "rel[ying] on elites to provide an intellectual backbone and an organizational structure."⁸¹ In both cases, scholars depict conservative beliefs as emerging from a fundamentally ideological struggle—regardless of whether they heralded from elite or grassroots corners of the movement. Helms's example, however, suggests that conservative Zionism was different. Unlike the forces of economic libertarianism and social traditionalism, Zionism entered mainstream conservative dogma not as the result of internal ideological forces, but through the influence of non-ideological advocacy groups like AIPAC often not identified with the movement itself. This theory challenges the traditional view of conservatism as a fundamentally ideological movement, suggesting instead that—at least on certain foreign policy matters—American conservatives have derived their views more from pragmatic special interest behavior than from principled ideology.



"When it comes to standing up for principles that deserve to survive," Helms announced to the Northside congregation, "we too often use our reverse gears."⁸² Having spoken at the pulpit for nearly fifteen minutes, North Carolina's senior senator knew that his audience's attention would soon slip away. With that, Helms returned to the main topic of his sermon—connecting his experiences in Israel to a much greater spiritual struggle facing the world:

We are living—I am convinced—in that day of the Antichrist. Everywhere, he is grasping for our souls, cajoling us and tempting us. The Antichrist is at war with our best friend [Jesus]. He figures that if he can undermine our faith, and persuade us to forsake our principles, then he will defeat our best friend. . . . We may throw our lives in reverse, but Jesus Christ will be victorious. The question is: do we intend to be victorious with him?⁸³

The senator's apocalyptic language was intentional. Speaking before the church's three-thousand-member congregation, the Republican firebrand sought to spur his conservative audience to action with an appeal to their religious convictions.

81. Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing*, 4, 8.

82. Helms speech at Northside Baptist Church, October 6, 1985, Helms Papers.

83. *Ibid.*

Invoking the specter of the End Times, Helms challenged his audience to recognize the spiritual importance of holding firm to one's principles, no matter the pressure from without. Yet as he exited the stage to a thunderous applause, it remained unclear if the senator had lived up to his own.

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