

Gantt, Helms Making Racial Appeals To Gain

By Andrew Alexander
Staff

North Carolina voters have an opportunity to make history on November 6 as Democrat Harvey Gantt tries to defeat Republican Jesse Helms who is seeking re-election to his fourth term in the U.S. Senate.

"It's going to be a special day for us in history, but it's going to take you," Gantt told a rally of 400 supporters in Lumberton recently. "Send somebody (to Washington) who really wants to work with the people of the state."

Gantt, the former mayor of Charlotte, is locked in a closed battle against Helms, political observers say, although Gantt has forged an eight-point lead in recent polls and despite beginning the race with lack of a statewide organization and campaign funds.

Helms, a leader of the national conservative movement, is considered to be the favorite in the race which experts say is the hottest political contest in the country this year.

"If I don't win this election, there are far worse things than being defeated for re-election to the U.S. Senate," Helms said in *The News and Observer* of Raleigh. "Selling your soul to stay there is one of them."

When the campaign started after the May primaries and June runoff elections, both Gantt and Helms said that their race would emphasize issues and not focus on the fact that Gantt is black and seeking to become the North Carolina's first black senator.

But as election day nears, both campaigns are making racial appeals to gain votes. Gantt, the first black student at Clemson University, has regularly visited black churches and universities since he became the Democratic nominee.

Gantt, who describes himself as a liberal, has also run political ads on black-oriented radio stations in many cities in the state. The ads urge voters to support Gantt on November 6 to send Helms home to North Carolina.

Helms' campaign aides criticized Gantt for running these ads, saying that Gantt was targeting black citizens to keep his re-election hopes alive. Gantt's camp maintained that Helms has used race-baiting tactics throughout his entire political career and that Gantt's ads never mention race.

In fact, Helms has made race a central issue in the Senate campaign. On October 17, Helms accused Gantt of

waging "a racial campaign," and said he was proud to be a redneck.

In an interview with *The News and Observer* in his Washington office, Helms defended his campaign of fund-raising letters that criticize black politicians, including Gantt. Saying that his critics include national Democratic Party Chairman Ronald H. Brown, who is black, Helms said, "Am I not supposed to identify, by name, who's saying what?"

He also said, "Mr. Gantt is making a racial campaign out of this, if you will pardon me. He's going around telling blacks, 'This is our chance, you've got to vote.'"

Helms charged that the North Carolina press does not see Gantt's statements "as having racial overtones... The media has got blinders on." But Helms said he might get the most black votes of his political career because many blacks oppose Gantt's support of abortion.

"There are black ministers who are concerned about the thing," he said. Helms also mentioned that some had visited his Washington office.

Helms defended a speech he gave in the Senate in which he praised the comments of an artist from Texas, saying that she was "not some ignorant redneck from North Carolina."

"I wrote that myself," Helms told the *News and Observer*. "I am constantly referred to by the artists and others as a redneck. That's fine. They're the salt of the earth. I'm proud to be called that."

A week later, some of North Carolina's best-known historians signed a fund-raising letter for Gantt. They said Helms "helped orchestrate the campaign in 1950 that defeated Sen. Frank Porter Graham by associating him with communism and race-mixing," *The Charlotte Observer* reported on October 24.

"Helms has been practicing the same brand of politics ever since," the letters say, "opposing every civil rights measure that has come before Congress, seeking to impose censorship on those who receive federal grants in the arts, opposing all abortions, even for victims of rape and incest, and voting against WIC, the nutrition program that has had startling success in improving the life chances of poor babies."

They describe Gantt's past as "another kind of history" that includes desegregating Clemson University and serving as Charlotte's mayor during its emergence as "a leading and enlightened metropolis."

Helms' spokeswoman Beth Burrus said it was untrue that Helms helped orchestrate a race-baiting campaign for Willis Smith who defeated Graham. "Helms was not in that campaign—other than for supporting Smith," she said.

Duke University's John Hope Franklin and UNC Professor William Leuchtenburg were among the 16 historians who signed the letter titled "Historians for Gantt."

The Daily Tar Heel described how history repeated itself in North Carolina politics in its September 10, 1984 edition when racism and mudslinging were injected into the legendary race between Graham and Smith during the special election in 1950. Racism and gutter politics were also evident in the Senate contest between former Gov. Jim Hunt and Helms in 1984.

Smith's campaign workers, one of whom was Helms, wrote and distributed

racist campaign literature on the eve of the June Democratic runoff primary. In his book, "Frank Porter Graham, a Southern Liberal," Warren Ashby described the attack on Graham, a former UNC president.

"White people, wake up before it is too late. You may not have another chance. Do you want Negroes working beside you, your wife and your daughters in your mills and factories? Negroes sleeping in the same hotels and rooming houses? Negroes using your toilet facilities? Frank Graham favors mingling of the races?"

That was the message the Smith campaign cried after the first primary when Graham defeated former Senator Robert Reynolds. Graham prevailed despite charges that he belonged to the Communist Party probably because he was a member of the Civil Rights Committee in the Senate.

