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## An historic opportunity in U.S. Senate race

By Ralph Levering  
SPECIAL TO THE POST

People living through important events often do not recognize their potential significance. Given the modest level of public interest in the Senate race between Harvey Gantt and Jesse Helms, that adage seems to be valid in North Carolina this fall. Yet the potential significance seems clear: if Gantt wins, the Tar Heel state will have its first African American high-level elected official (president, U.S. senator or governor) in its more than 200-year history as a state.

In the 19th century one southern state, Mississippi, sent two black senators to Washington. But in the 20th century — a time of great progress for blacks (and for southerners generally) that has witnessed a civil rights revolution and the emergence of a large, educated, black middle class — not a single African American has been elected senator in any southern state.

As a Tar Heel-born U.S. history professor, I take a particular interest — and pride — in the state's history. I teach students that North Carolina has been a national leader in this century in such areas as economic development, medical research, and higher education, and that the civil rights movement occurred here much more constructively — and peacefully — than in most other southern states.

Drawing upon Alexis de Tocqueville and many other writers, I teach my students that the most tenaciously held American ideal is the belief in equality. Together with widespread prosperity, this vision of equality under law has drawn large numbers of immigrants from all over the world to our country. Do we North Carolinians really want future history books to point out that, despite our deepening commitment to equality and despite increasingly diverse populations that averaged roughly one-quarter African American, no southern state in the 20th century elected an African American senator?

Like many Americans, I distrust many politicians, especially "no government" Republicans and "government-is-the-answer" Democrats. Yet I admire the far-sighted public servants of both parties who willingly accept financial sacrifices and unfair criticisms. I considered voting for Ross Perot in 1992, and still hope that a viable third party develops. Having voted for both Democrats and Republicans in the past, I see myself as a "moderate." (I use quotation marks around political labels because they often obscure more than they reveal; both Gantt and Helms, for example, strongly believe in the capitalist system and in obtaining government benefits for constituents.)

In observing the Senate race this year, I am pleased that both Gantt and Helms have moved toward the political middle, at least rhetorically. But despite the many services that Helms has performed for North Carolina over the years, I cannot vote for him for one main reason: unlike former Alabama Gov. George Wallace, who also gained a national reputation in the 1960s as a white racist, Helms has never repudiated — nor asked forgiveness for — the blatant racism that propelled him into high office.

Put simply, Helms's formerly explicit, now largely implicit racism, contradicts my deepest beliefs as a Christian and as an American. It goes against the way I try to live, and what I try to teach. I thus could never vote for Jesse Helms nor, for that matter, for someone like Louis Farrakhan.

Partly because our other senator, Lauch Faircloth, is a staunch "conservative," I can vote comfortably this fall for Gantt, a thoughtful and experienced "moderate-to-liberal" architect/public servant whose life epitomizes the American Dream of success through education, shrewdness and hard work. Unlike a generation ago, I believe that fulfilling this dream — including the dream of being a U.S. senator — is now possible for people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

If the state's majority-white electorate chooses Gantt, my belief in the South's growing practice of equality — and in North Carolina's continuing leadership of the region — will be vindicated. More important, if he takes the oath of office in January as the first black to join the roughly 50 white North Carolinians who have served in the U.S. Senate, both Gantt and his fellow Tar Heels can be proud of the history they have made.

RALPH LEVERING is Professor of History at Davidson College

## We're in need of an awakening

By Michael Sharp  
NATIONAL NEWSPAPER  
PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

In my time on this planet, I've found that if there is one axiom that has proven to be true time and time again, it is that the hardest thing for a person to do is change.

As I look back at African American history, I am filled with an immense sense of pride at what we have accomplished and, at the same time, I am filled with remorse that more of our people aren't fighting the good fight.

While there are more law-abiding African Americans pulling their weight in our society, there are still far too many brothers and sisters who aren't. The majority of these people, our people, are in this predicament either because of ignorance or apathy or both. This creates a breeding ground of hopelessness and despair that eventually feeds upon itself, leaving little room for escape.

It's similar to a nightmare in which you are trapped in a room full of white folk and forced to watch our people on the Ricki Lake show. Even though the African Americans on the screen are hardly representative of the larger population, you feel uneasy. In our poorer communities, this nightmare is all too real but the solution to this problem is the same solution for a bad nightmare — an awakening.

As time passes, what is becoming brutally clear is that it is in the best interest of African Americans and other Americans to be awakened. Ignorance must be eliminated in our communities, and only we can eliminate it. Ignorance, of course, can never be fully eradicated, but surely we can do a whole lot better than we've been doing! We, as a people have to disavow ignorance, not embrace it.

I have witnessed first-hand how ignorance sneaks up on African Americans, befriends us, lulls us into a false sense of

security, then rips our whole world apart. Ignorance knows no financial boundaries, although the poorer you are, the higher the probability that knowledge will be restricted. In America, information is a commodity. Those without access have to work harder just to get information. However, an education is no guarantee against ignorance. There are more than a few of us out there with degrees and no practical knowledge of what we're talking about. These people can be more dangerous than illiterate, crack-smoking, gun-toting gangsters. By being educated far beyond their competence, some people conspire to keep us in disunity. Whether they have good intentions or bad doesn't make much of a difference because the results are still the same. The time is now to change — not just change for the sake of change but for a positive, life enhancing, race-fortifying change. Instead of standing idly by as our lying and conniving segment — you know and they

know who they are — continue to exploit the system, do something about it. I'm not saying get a gun and take on the nearest gang. Be smart. Lead by example. Give younger brothers and sisters someone to respect and admire. You may not get the recognition you want or even rightfully deserve, but if it was easy everybody would be doing it.

If you have children, educate them on how great America really is and how much better it can become. Show them how to take responsibility and not government handouts. Teach them that everything has its price, that "ain't nuthin'" free.

Do something. The world is always changing. It's constantly presenting us with new challenges and different situations. Either we wake up, unite and promote our brightest and our best, or we let ignorance continue to wreak havoc on a great people.

MICHAEL SHARP is a member of Project 21, an African American leadership group.



Helms



Gantt



## Kissing episode N.C.'s hot topic



DG  
Martin

North Carolina's biggest news story of the season is not the November election.

But the big story does cover most of the political hot button topics.

Schools. Discipline and the lack of it. Politics. Litigation. Local government. Political correctness. Family values and raising children.

Exploitation. You know what I am talking about, don't you? You know the best known North Carolinian today. It is not Jim Hunt and it is not Jesse Helms, is it? It is 6-year-old Johnathan Prevette, the little boy whose kiss of a first grade classmate made front-page news across the country.

Why are we so fixed on this small classroom crisis? Why is the whole country and much of the world focused on our state?

Hasn't this matter — and its aftermath — gotten too far out of hand?

Or is there something useful to be learned? Maybe. I think the story reminds us of some of the toughest questions we face in rearing our children and running our schools.

Here are a couple of those questions.

First, how do we react when one of our children gets in trouble at school? Of course, we want our children to get a fair shake from those who have authority over them. And it is tempting to rush to defend them every time they get into trouble.

There are times when a school authority's mistake is so grave or so damaging to the child that confrontation is necessary. But those times are probably rare.

Ordinarily, we serve our children better if we help them understand that discipline is never perfect — never absolutely fair. Even though it is imperfect, discipline is necessary. And it is usually good for us.

Most of us agree that there is too little rather than too much discipline in our classrooms. I

have a feeling that some of those who criticize our schools most severely for a lack of discipline go after school authorities the hardest when one of their own children is punished for a school infraction.

The punishment for Johnathan's kiss may have been too severe or even unnecessary. But wouldn't Johnathan have been better off if his parents had swallowed hard, given Johnathan a hug and kiss at home, told him to mind his teacher, and sent him back to school ready to move on to the next class project? Better off that way, I think, than being pushed on to the front page of every newspaper in the country.

All this leads to the second hard question that sometimes confronts parents.

When is it a good idea to propel a child into the public spotlight?

When Johnathan gets in a little trouble next time — and surely he will if he is like any other normal child, will he have a chance for normal supportive discipline? Or will everybody in authority be watching out for

litigation and bad publicity and just let Johnathan take care of his own growing up?

I don't think the answers will be happy ones.

Ask Johnathan 25 years from now. I bet his answer will be something like this:

"I have had to carry the rap of being the 'classroom kisser' all of my life. Maybe sometimes it helped me get attention. But most of the time it has been a noose around my neck. It is all anyone wants to talk about.

Nothing could happen in my family without the press reporting it. That is quite a strain on a family. And later on, when I got in trouble at school, everybody would always remember. Once, when I got into trouble with the police, it made the headlines all over the country.

If I hadn't been the 'kisser,' nobody would have noticed much. I could have moved along better than I did without all that publicity. No, I wish it had never happened."

D.G. MARTIN is vice president of public affairs for the University of North Carolina system.

## A vote for Clinton a matter of survival for African Americans

NATIONAL NEWSPAPER  
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Ralph Bunche once said: "We must fight as a race for everything that makes for a better country and a better world. We are dreaming idiots and trusting fools to do anything less." Lest we want to fall into that fateful category of "trusting fools" Bunche spoke about, we, as African Americans, must show up at the polls on Nov. 5 in massive numbers.

There are clear and compelling reasons to once again

cast our vote for Bill Clinton. Returning him to the White House is absolutely essential to a future of opportunity for African Americans.

The 1996 election, for African Americans, is about more than mere civic duty. This election is about black survival. It also represents an historic opportunity to build on a rather lengthy list of policy and program developments that have made a positive difference in our lives in the past four years. These policy and program developments have come from the Clinton White House, and judging by

President Clinton's first term and looking at the alternative, he is, by far, our best choice to establish a beachhead of hope for preparing to meet the challenges of the 21st century. History also makes a solid case for African Americans to support President Clinton. There has not been a two-term Democratic President since Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal.

For all the accomplishments of the past 30-plus years of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Carter, the fact is they have had but one term to enact their

legislative agendas, and the gains — while very real and meaningful — have been stymied at the hands of Republican successors. As a result, many of the issues closest to the hearts of African Americans have not been fully woven into the national policy fabric. In 1996, we know that much work remains, but we can only keep the momentum going by voting a second term for Bill Clinton. It is the only way that gains of past administrations, as well as the Clinton Administration, can be solidified.

The fact that whoever is president during the next four years will have the opportunity to appoint at least two new members to a Supreme Court that has made 5-4 decisions against affirmative action and redistricting is as urgent a reason as African Americans need to defeat ultra-conservative former Sen. Bob Dole.

The worst thing that could happen on Nov. 5 is for African Americans to wrongly decide to sit this election out, either out of a false sense of security created by media predictions of a landslide for Clinton or from falling

prey to those old enemies of indifference and apathy.

Our vote is critically important in our future and that of our family and community. Let's make our last presidential vote of the 20th century an historic vote that rings loudly throughout the land, conveying a clear message to politicians everywhere that African Americans are active participants in America's political process and our voices will be heard.

The National Newspaper Publishers Association represents 200 black newspapers.