

# The 1950 Senate campaign

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY DAVID WALBERT

Campaign flyer for Willis Smith, 1950.

## As you read...

### FRANK PORTER GRAHAM

In 1932, to save money during the Depression, the state combined its three white universities — the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, the North Carolina State College of Agriculture and Engineering in Raleigh, and the Woman's College in Greensboro — into a single Consolidated University of North Carolina.

Frank Porter Graham (1886–1972), president of the UNC campus at Chapel Hill, was tapped as the first president of the consolidated university. As a history professor at UNC, he had worked to find legal help for workers in the 1929 Loray Cotton Mill strike. As president, Graham used his tremendous political skills to strengthen the university. President Roosevelt made him an advisor on New Deal legislation and appointed him to the War Labor Board during World War II, and Graham was able to use his influence to gain federal funds for UNC. He also opened the Chapel Hill campus to military training during the war.

Graham also continued to take progressive — and controversial — stands on issues of race, social justice, and freedom of speech. He brought prominent African Americans such as the poet Langston Hughes to speak on the Chapel Hill campus. He overturned the UNC medical school's quota system limiting the number of Jewish applicants it would accept. He worked to bring college athletics under control and to make athletics secondary to education.

In 1938, Graham spoke before the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, which brought black and white reformers from across the region together for the first time. In his address, he called for “equal and exact justice to all” — including the end of racial segregation. Adding to the controversy, the group included members of the Communist Party. Then, in 1946, President Harry Truman appointed Graham to the Committee on Civil Rights, which wrote a report calling for racial equality.

### THE 1950 SENATE CAMPAIGN

In 1949, North Carolina's progressive governor W. Kerr Scott appointed Graham to the U.S. Senate to replace Senator J. Melville Broughton, who had died in office. Conservatives had always disliked Graham and had accused him of encouraging Communists. They were infuriated by Graham's appointment to the Senate, and when Graham faced re-election in 1950, they ran an openly racist campaign against him.

At the time, African Americans were prevented from voting, and the Democratic Party controlled the state's politics. As a result, the Democratic primary was the most important election, and whoever won it would easily defeat his Republican opponent. Graham's major opponent in the primary was Willis Smith, a

conservative. In addition to printing the flyer on this page, Smith's supporters distributed faked photographs of Graham's wife dancing with a black man. Another flyer accused Graham of appointing a black student to West Point. In fact, he had named a black student as an alternate choice — but the military had only recently desegregated, and southern conservatives still opposed the idea.

Despite these charges, Graham won the most votes in the primary. But he failed to win a majority, and so he faced Smith again in a runoff. Smith won the runoff election by a narrow vote, 51 to 49 percent.

Jesse Helms, then news director for WRAL radio in Raleigh, played a role in Smith's campaign. He organized a rally that convinced Smith to pursue the runoff election against Graham, then developed some of Smith's advertising — including the themes of the flyer on this page. Smith was so impressed that he asked Helms to serve as his administrative assistant in Washington, which he did from 1951 to 1953.

After leaving the Senate, Graham took a position with the United Nations to mediate the dispute between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir region. He continued working for peace in that region until his death in 1972, at the age of 85.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

This flyer was distributed by Willis Smith's supporters during the Senate primary campaign in 1950.

1. From what you know of Frank Porter Graham, which charges in this campaign flyer were factual? Were any clearly untrue?
2. How did the flyer portray Graham?
3. Based on this flyer, what scared conservative whites the most about desegregation? How can you tell?
4. How did Smith's supporters define the "traditions of the South"?

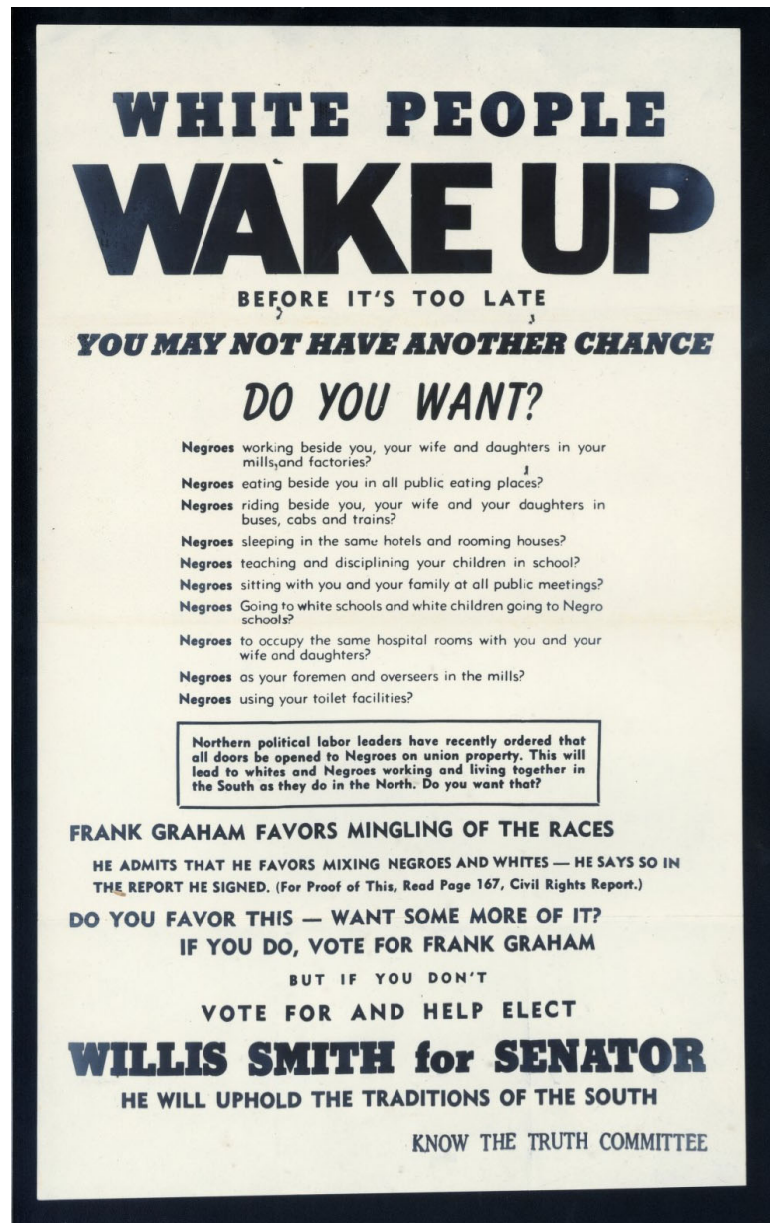


Figure 3.

## WHITE PEOPLE WAKE UP

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

*you may not have another chance*

**DO YOU WANT?**

Negroes working beside you, your wife and daughters in your mills and factories?

**Negroes** eating beside you in all public eating places?

**Negroes** riding beside you, your wife and your daughters in buses, cabs and trains?

**Negroes** sleeping in the same hotels and rooming houses?

**Negroes** teaching and disciplining your children in school?

**Negroes** sitting with you and your family at all public meetings?

**Negroes** Going to white schools and white children going to Negro schools?

**Negroes** to occupy the same hospital rooms with you and your wife and daughters?

**Negroes** as your foremen and overseers in the mills?

**Negroes** using your toilet facilities?

**Northern political labor leaders have recently ordered that all doors be opened to Negroes on union property. This will lead to whites and Negroes working and living together in the South as they do in the North. Do you want that?**

#### **FRANK GRAHAM FAVORS MINGLING OF THE RACES**

HE ADMITS THAT HE FAVORS MIXING NEGROES AND WHITES — HE SAYS SO IN THE REPORT HE SIGNED<sup>1</sup>. (For Proof of This, Read Page 167, Civil Rights Report.)

DO YOU FAVOR THIS — WANT SOME MORE OF IT? IF YOU DO, VOTE FOR FRANK GRAHAM

BUT IF YOU DON'T

VOTE FOR AND HELP ELECT

WILLIS SMITH FOR SENATOR

HE WILL UPHOLD THE TRADITIONS OF THE SOUTH

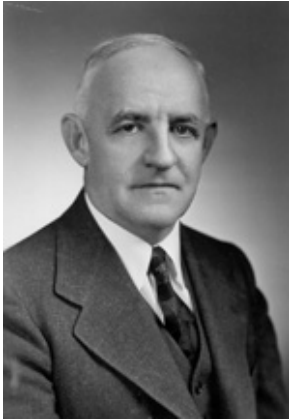


Figure 2. Frank Porter Graham as U.S. Senator (1949–51).

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## Notes

1. The report of the Committee on Civil Rights (see sidebar).

## About the author

### DAVID WALBERT

David Walbert is Editorial and Web Director for LEARN NC in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education. He is responsible for all of LEARN NC's educational publications, oversees development of various web applications including LEARN NC's website and content management systems, and is the organization's primary web, information, and visual designer. He has worked with LEARN NC since August 1997.

David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.

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### Figure 2 (page 5)

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### Figure 3 (page 3)

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