

The Principles Behind the Principles
A Personal Look at the Lasting Influence of US Senator Jesse Helms
What Would Jesse Do?
By Estelle Snyder

One of the most engaging presentations of the inaugural North Carolina Conservative Leadership Conference was a panel discussion presented by the Jesse Helms Center and moderated by the Center's president, John Dodd. Panel members included Tom Boney, who was a member of Senator Jesse Helms' Senate Staff before taking assignments for the Senate Committee on Agriculture and as deputy staff director for the minority staff of the Senate Foreign Relations; Jimmy Broughton, who was with the Senator for his last 12 years in office and was his last chief of staff; Bill Cobey, a close political ally and personal friend, who provided important insight on grassroots reactions to national issues; and Tom Kleine, who served as chief counsel for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during the critical time when Congress was insisting on UN reforms as a condition of continued support. Along with moderator Dodd, who has worked with Senator Helms for more than twenty years, these panelists brought unique insider insight to their topic, The Helms Principles.

Briefly summarized, the Helms Principles as they relate to international relations are:

Protect Our National Sovereignty - It is never in our national interest to be a party to agreements that would give any other entity authority over our troops, our trade, our tariffs, our citizens or our policies.

Promote a Strong National Defense - Our nation must be firm in its resolve to never have its autonomy or freedom threatened by any enemy. That resolve must be demonstrated by a military force ready to respond to threats to our domestic peace and tranquility from any place, and of any kind.

Pursue a Moral Foreign Policy - We are people who cannot ignore the plight of the abused or the threats of tyrants. The United States of America must always measure its foreign policy against the faith guided tenets of our heritage, not current opinion or selfish self-interest.

These principles are the distillation and specific application of the core principles and philosophy by which Senator Helms guided his entire life.

It is impossible to fully understand the Helms Principles without knowing about the life principles that form their framework. The panel provided rich insights into how those principles were put into action and demonstrated why history will include Senator Jesse Helms as one of the most important political figures in the latter part of the 20th Century and the opening of the 21st.

John Dodd opened the discussion by pointing out two things that were priorities for Senator Helms, promoting free enterprise and encouraging young people. He noted that in his thirty years in office the Senator's staff tracked the number of students from North Carolina who had an opportunity to visit with him at the Capitol and that the number topped 100,000. Students outranked everybody on the Senator's schedule.

One of the things the Senator wanted students to know about was what he called the miracle of America, our free enterprise system. He believed that America should always be a place where dreams and hard work could combine to achieve success. He opposed policies that dampened initiative or punished achievement. Today, the Jesse Helms Center offers annual Free Enterprise Leadership Conferences for high school students as a way to carry on Senator Helms' commitment to making sure young people know and value the opportunity they have by virtue of the blessing of being an American.

As each panelist spoke, it was clear that the conservative principles that were foundational to Jesse Helms, and the principles that he would not compromise, were evident in every detail of his life and career. This was apparent in the way he wanted constituent mail handled, as well as in what he said when he made history as the first legislator in the world to address the United Nations Security Council.

Jimmy Broughton pointed out that Jesse Helms and Ted Kennedy got far more mail than any other members of Congress, and that Senator Helms mail often included requests for assistance from people who had found their own representatives unresponsive to their needs. The Helms staff was legendary for its constituent service. That dedication was a reflection of Senator Helms' belief that government should work for the people, never against them. Tom Boney contrasted the typical Congressional form letter response to a citizen's communication with the kind of letter that Senator Helms would approve, and the kind of follow-up that every citizen could expect, regardless of party affiliation.

Both Boney and Bill Cobey commented on the Senator's honesty and his unyielding adherence to his convictions. Boney related that Helms once said "if the people of North Carolina wanted to return me home because of a pro-life position, so be it." Boney stated that Helms' underlying faith in God gave him the strength to endure in the midst of Washington's political wars. Cobey related a story from the 1980's when an aide to the Senator suggested that he tone down his anti-abortion rhetoric at a fund raising event. The very suggestion made the Senator angry. When the time came for his speech, the Senator deliberately introduced the topic and looked directly at the aide while he articulated his position in a way no one could misunderstand. Cobey said the moral of that story was you didn't tell Jesse Helms to compromise his principles.

Tom Kline recounted a quote attributed to Senator Helms that is a part of the Congressional Record. The Senator was involved in a heated floor debate with Senator Ted Kennedy; Kennedy kept interrupting him. Finally, in exasperation Senator Helms said, "I can neither match the Senator from Massachusetts in decibels or Jezebels." Immediately after his statement, another Senator privately went to Senator Helms and

suggested he might want to revise his remarks for the record, but Senator Helms let the comment stand. He had no interest in revisionist history.

Kleine also discussed Helms' tremendous influence on our foreign policy, citing specific examples, such as breaking the hold of Communism in Europe and keeping America's signature off dangerous international treaties that would have imperiled our nation's sovereignty. He also noted that, on more than one occasion, much to the chagrin of his staff, Senator Helms would keep heads of state and other dignitaries waiting while he met with schoolchildren or constituents from North Carolina. It was obvious in these moments that Helms had a set of clear priorities and he had no intention of compromising them.

John Dodd wrapped up the discussion by saying, "Senator Helms went to Washington with a different agenda than most of the people who go there. He didn't go to be someone; he went to do something. He was determined to advance the conservative values he believed were best for the country he loved so much. He was goal-focused, he did his homework, and he worked very hard – probably harder than any of his peers. Jesse Helms had the courage of his convictions and faith in his God."

It has been four years since Jesse Helms retired from the Senate but his influence is still strong. If our nation is very fortunate, that will still be true in forty years and for as long as our democracy endures.