

A Tribute to Jesse Helms

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Once in a lifetime there comes a legislator so great that he transcends ideologies, political parties and personalities. Such a man was Jesse A. Helms, Jr. (R-NC). His greatness is beyond words. His opponents called him mean. He was one of the kindest Senators ever to grace the United States Capitol. His opponents claimed that young people hated the Senator. Among the pages of both parties he was the most popular Senator. He never belittled them. He spent hours with them, answering their questions over ice cream he purchased for them. His enemies said he was against everything.



Truth be told, Helms accomplished more than most legislators. When he was first elected in the [Republican](#) landslide of 1972, it was predicted that he never would be re-elected. North Carolina voters sent Helms back to [the Senate](#) four more times to represent them. For thirty years he served the people of his state, and helped build a movement which benefited the entire nation. In doing so, he always took care of his family life. He and his lovely wife, Dot, adopted a nine year old boy with Cerebral Palsy because they read in the newspaper that the boy's wish was to have a mother and a father.

Ronald W. Reagan might not have been President had Helms not rescued him in the 1976 primary. Reagan's race against Gerald R. Ford, Jr. was tough; it was not decided with finality until the GOP nominating convention in Kansas City. Because Reagan had a strong reservoir of support after 1976, he was the favorite for the presidential nomination in 1980.

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When Presidents Reagan, George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush were correct on issues, they had no better ally than Helms. He left no stone unturned to help his friends. But when Reagan and the Bushes were wrong, they had no fiercer opponent. His enemies claimed he was racist. He was not a racist. Rather, he embraced Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream that people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. That led Helms tenaciously to oppose affirmative action. What he did to help poverty-stricken Blacks in his home state is legendary. His enemies declared that he hated homosexuals, yet he helped raise millions of dollars to fight AIDS in Africa.

The reason the vicious media never succeeded in defeating Helms was because the picture they tried to create of the Senator was untrue. People realized that the real man was distinct from the media's caricature. One could not converse with the Senator from North Carolina without recognizing the strength of his character.

We became friends when he was first elected. I accompanied him, at his request, to the Senate Clerk's office in the Capitol, where he inquired as to which facilities would be available to Senators-elect. As we emerged from the office a television crew was waiting. A reporter, thrusting a microphone in the Senator's face, asked, "Well, how does it feel to be the most extreme right-winger ever elected to the United States Senate?" Without batting an eye Helms said, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Yes, Helms had a terrific sense of humor.

At Christmastime in 1973 I was an unknown figure in Washington, D.C. I had spent years getting Senator Gordon L. Allott's (R-CO) name in the papers. I wrote speeches for Senator Carl T. Curtis (R-NE). Once when I was in the office Curtis bequeathed to me directly above the Senate floor, the phone rang. The voice on the other end said, "Paul? This is Jesse Helms. I just wanted to call to wish you a Merry Christmas. And I want to thank you for all you do for the cause." I was flabbergasted. It is one thing for me to receive a call like that today. I am, for what it is worth, well known. But back then few knew me, and most Senators did not give people like me the time of day. But Jesse Helms always thought of others. Over the years, with hundreds of calls and dozens of meetings, Jesse Helms never changed. He was always humble, self-effacing and ready

to help.

This nation owes a greater debt to Helms than it realizes. I have been blessed to have known and worked with two great men – the late James B. Allen (D-AL) and Helms. It is near certain that I will not live long enough to see another towering figure emerge in the Senate on the strength of his character. I pray for the repose of the soul of Jesse Helms, who went home to the Lord on the 4th of July. History should treat him kindly, considering he made so much of it.

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