



**by Paul M. Weyrich**

## **Senator Jesse Helms, A Man for All Seasons**

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Last week I was humbled to be asked to pay tribute to my hero, Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC). I was one of about 20 who did so.

President George W. Bush and Dr. James Dobson spoke via video tape. Yes, the program started late and it ran too long for the dear Senator who, in failing health, had to sit through it all. But the tribute was long over due. When Jesse Helms left the Senate, after thirty years of service, he was too ill for such a tribute. He is much better now so he and Dot (Mrs. Helms) and their daughters sat there and drank it all in. It really was a wonderful event, sponsored by the Jesse Helms Center, an organization which furthers the causes with which the Senator has been identified for many decades.

Senator Helms worked for two Democratic Senators from North Carolina in the 1950s. He then went back to the State and became a commentator. His editorials on WRAL TV were broadcast throughout North Carolina, which is why in 1972 when he decided to run for the United States Senate he already had more name recognition than the Congressman he defeated.

I first met the good Senator in November of 1972. He had come to Washington to check with the Senate Disbursing Office about what facilities were made available to a Senator-elect. (In those days there were almost none.) I was at the disbursing office to collect my pay. I was a part-time employee of the Senate then. I introduced myself and told him I thought his was the most important Senate race for Conservatives in the whole country. He thanked me and as we both left that office together a TV reporter came rushing up with his cameraman and shoved a microphone in the Senator's face and said, "Senator Helms, what does it feel like to be the most reactionary Right Wing Republican to have been elected this year?" Without missing a beat Senator Helms replied, "Well beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

Jesse Helms did so many things for the Conservative Movement that it would be difficult to mention them in a single commentary. First, he gave us hope. I came to Washington two years after the decisive defeat of Senator Barry M. Goldwater for President. Good conservative Members of the House and Senate were afraid to call themselves Conservatives. Jesse Helms had no such reservation. More and more others followed his lead.

The Senator from North Carolina understood something which again has been forgotten by the Republican Establishment: You can win by losing. Helms over 30 years offered hundreds of amendments to pending legislation. Some which were very important, especially pertaining to foreign policy, became law. But many, many others were defeated. He didn't care. He knew that we would use those amendments in upcoming elections and those amendments would help defeat incumbents. We tried that idea out in 1976 and what do you know. Democratic Senators in Utah, Wyoming, New Mexico and California were defeated. Then more such defeats in 1978. More Liberals were defeated in New Hampshire, Iowa, Colorado, even Minnesota by using Senator Helms amendments.

In many cases the Senate candidate was completely unaware of what was happening. Issue groups such as Right-to-Life and Right-to-Work would write thousands of letters asking that

their members write or call their Senator to ask him to change his position on an issue. When the Senator refused to do so it made the constituents angry and they voted against him.

The height of using Senate votes against incumbents came in 1980 when Senators in Idaho, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Georgia, Indiana and a half dozen other states were all defeated thanks to the strategy employed by Senator Helms and later implemented by issue cluster groups. That practice continued to a greater or lesser degree through 1994.

I can say without fear of contradiction that many incumbent liberal Senators never would have been defeated without the help of Jesse Helms. I mentioned 1980. That was the year Ronald Wilson Reagan was elected President. He might not have run had Jesse Helms not rescued his failing campaign in 1976. Reagan, former Governor of California, declared his candidacy for President against President Gerald R. Ford. Governor Meldrim Thomson, Jr. (R-NH) said Reagan would win in a landslide in his State. Instead, Ford at first was declared the winner. Later it was determined that Reagan indeed did win New Hampshire by about 1,500 votes but the expectations about a landslide victory essentially killed the Reagan Campaign. He went on to lose primary after primary. Then came North Carolina. Reagan followed the lead of Jesse Helms and declared his opposition to the giveaway of the Panama Canal. He won an upset victory. From there Reagan went on to win big in Texas and elsewhere. It was a nail-biter of a contest in Kansas City that year. Ford finally won, but not by much, and Reagan became the heir apparent for 1980. But for Helms, as columnist Robert D. Novak suggested, Reagan might have been relegated to the ashbin of additional history.

I was the last live speaker at the tribute to Senator Helms. I had a 3 x 5 card with eight words on it to remind me what I wanted to say. Wouldn't you know that all eight topics were covered by others so I had to improvise. One of the points I made was about the media. I pointed out that the media portrayed Senator Helms as mean, vindictive, nasty, even vicious. If you know the man, and thousands did over those three decades, the opposite is true. He is gracious, kind, decent and never has a mean thing to say about anyone. This is one of many reasons the media has lost credibility in the country. In North Carolina the newspapers, especially the CHARLOTTE NEWS AND OBSERVER, vilified the Senator. Yet, he was elected statewide five times. He even defeated popular Governor James B. Hunt, Jr., a feat many conservatives believed impossible. The people in North Carolina knew Jesse Helms and trusted him.

I received many notes and calls from Senator Helms thanking me for my work or commenting on our family Christmas card -- well before anyone except a handful of Senate employees knew I existed. Jesse Helms is one fine gentleman. He loves the Lord and that came through in everything he did. We were lucky to have such a Senator. He did so much good. He even helped to reform the United Nations, for which his strongest critics gave him credit. He has been a man of his word in a deceitful culture.

As I mentioned to the crowd last Tuesday, those of us who were reared in the Judeo-Christian tradition know that God provides leaders at certain times to do His work. Surely, God raised up the Senator from North Carolina for a time when we badly needed him. Phyllis Schlafly was correct when she said Conservatives have a prayer asking God to bring us another Jesse Helms. As we say in the Eastern Church, "May God grant him many years!"

Paul M. Weyrich is the Chairman and CEO of the Free Congress Foundation.

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