

Opinion

Columnists

An American Original Passes

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Freedom lost a true champion and tyranny lost an implacable foe on July 4, 2008 with the death of former U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms. He was a true Rock of Gibraltar for conservatism from his election in 1972 to his retirement 30 years later.

He was a fierce anti-communist and an unapologetic, “my country right or wrong” patriot.

Resurrecting Reagan

It is often forgotten in the warm memories of Ronald Reagan’s successes as president that his first run for that office nearly ended in career-destroying disaster. Reagan’s 1976 challenge to Gerald Ford had stumbled from the start; after losing all of the first five primary elections there were loud calls for Reagan to drop out. But in North Carolina, standing between Reagan, conservatism and defeat was Jesse Helms, who for not the first or last time in his career said “no.”



In this June 16, 1983 photo, President Ronald Reagan greets Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C. at a dinner honoring Helms in Washington. Helms died July 4, 2008 at age 86. (AP Photo/Ed Reinke, file)

The senator instinctively knew Reagan represented the Republicans of North Carolina and America better than Ford did. Helms repeatedly pleaded with Reagan in-person while Tom Ellis, Helms’ in-state political guru, laid out the parameters for a North Carolina victory to Reagan’s staff. By all accounts, it was a close call, but Reagan decided to contest the North Carolina primary.

By following the advice of Helms and Ellis, Reagan won a smashing 10-point victory there, one that propelled him

into a dead-heat with Ford at the GOP national convention. Reagan’s speech at the end of the 1976 convention, so spotlighting the banality of Gerald Ford, cemented his position as the front-runner for 1980.

Jesse Helms the Politician

I spent five months in North Carolina in 1972 working in Helms' first campaign, so his tenacity and devotion to principle, so important in 1976, was no surprise to me.

Upon election, Helms was immediately a leading conservative voice in the Senate, becoming "Barry Goldwater with a drawl" as one wag put it at the time.

During the GOP control of the Senate, he was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee for many years, waging unceasing war against communism and the corruption of the United Nations. He was also an unrelenting enemy of the nanny-state here at home. Helms' attitude about freedom, both at home and abroad, is best related in this quote: "Compromise, hell! If freedom is right and tyranny is wrong, why should those who believe in freedom treat it as if it were a roll of bologna to be bartered away one slice at a time?"

Helms refused compromise with freedom's enemies. Not a bad epithet.

Jesse Helms the Man

I hope that I will be forgiven for closing on a personal note. Because Helms was a distinct underdog in 1972, the campaign staff was small and very young, with an average age of 22. This provided an opportunity to get to know the candidate well. Additionally, as low man on the totem pole (and the fourth Italian Catholic in the state at the time), I was occasionally assigned candidate-driving duties in addition to my designated tasks of drafting position papers and newspaper ads. The driving provided many hours of one-on-one conversation with Helms, who was as thoroughly honorable, decent and kind an individual as I have ever met in politics.

The liberal caricature of him as a snarling misanthrope is 180 degrees from the truth. He was a courtly southern gentleman through and through. In all the hours we spent together, including tense campaign situations, I never heard him utter a mean-spirited or bigoted word. He had very strong beliefs that he clung to doggedly, but at the core of his heart was a fine Christian man and a warrior for what is right in America.

You have to have a cynical heart indeed to see his dying on July 4 as mere coincidence.

My final meeting with Helms was last year, sharing lunch with him at his office in Raleigh. As I turned at the door to say goodbye, I got one last glimpse of Helms' trademark crooked smile and twinkling eyes. He gave a quick salute and said, "God bless you, Scorp" (that being my nickname from 1972).

Now it is my turn: God bless you, Jesse Helms. May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.