

Beacon of conservatives

'Here's Where I Stand: A Memoir'

Jesse Helms

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By Matthew Continetti

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ON Oct. 31, 1942, Jesse Helms and Dorothy "Dot" Coble married in Raleigh, N.C. Anyone who laments the ascendance of American conservatism over the last quarter century — from Ronald Reagan's presidential victory in 1980 through Newt Gingrich's successful 1994 campaign to win GOP majorities in the House and Senate to George W. Bush's reelection in 2004 — should rue this day.

Before then, Helms was in the Navy and relatively apolitical. Growing up, "Almost everybody we knew was a Democrat," the longtime Republican senator from North Carolina writes in his memoir, "Here's Where I Stand." But conversations with his father-in-law, Jacob L. Coble, would introduce him to a set of ideas that, although marginal, would transform his politics and then his country's. Those talks with Coble, he writes, "marked the beginning of my career as a conservative." And the rest, as they say, is history.

That's because Helms may well have done more to advance American conservatism than any other politician, including Reagan. Indeed, if there had been no Helms, it's likely there would have been no Reagan. "Here's Where I Stand" explains why.

In 1976, when Helms was midway through his freshman term as the first GOP senator from his state since Reconstruction, Reagan was challenging President Ford for the GOP nomination. At first, things went badly. Reagan lost New Hampshire and several other early primaries. The North Carolina primary was thought to be his last stand. So, Reagan turned to Helms.

Helms, along with his close advisor Tom Ellis, more or less ran Reagan's North Carolina campaign. Ellis did Reagan's scheduling; Helms barnstormed the state alongside the candidate. They placed Reagan speeches on North Carolina TV stations. Helms and Ellis also had a direct-mail apparatus, the National Congressional Club, which they used to raise funds for Reagan. Their efforts — and Reagan's political talents — paid dividends:

The former California governor won the primary in a stunning upset and won the Texas primary a week later. Reagan lost the 1976 nomination, of course. But his North Carolina victory cleared the path for his march to the White House four years later. Helms had been ahead of the political curve.

And not for the last time. Fact is, Helms has always been a pioneer. It was he who did the most to insert the "morality in foreign policy" plank into the 1976 Republican Party platform, which overturned the Nixon-Kissinger strategy of détente and elevated in importance the nature of regimes to a place above "realist" calculations of national interest. This, too, set the tone for Reagan's foreign policy — and almost 30 years later for Bush's drive to democratize the greater Middle East.

It was Helms who first hosted Margaret Thatcher on her trips to Washington, D.C., before she became prime minister of Great Britain. It was Helms who first pressed for reforming the United Nations before anyone had ever heard of tough-talking U.N. Ambassador John R. Bolton. It was Helms who introduced a Senate bill calling for a flat tax in 1982. And it was Helms who introduced a Senate bill in 1983 to partially privatize Social Security.

It is no exaggeration to say that the domestic and foreign policies of today's Republican Party were, in some way or another, first seriously proposed by Helms. But his influence on American politics goes beyond ideology. As an on-air editorialist for Raleigh radio and television stations, Helms was one of the first conservatives to understand the power of "new media." The National Congressional Club revolutionized direct-mail fundraising. And Helms anticipated today's polarized and ideological politics — in five elections, he never won more than 55% of the vote.

Helms always knew where he stood: "I was the local conservative liberals loved to hate," he writes, "and I was content." But why did they hate him so? Perhaps it was his demeanor. Helms is a sweet and kind man, especially to children, but he had a way of dealing with his political opponents that rankled liberal sensibilities. By 1978, the Raleigh editorial pages had dubbed him "Senator No." He did his best to live up to the label.

More likely, the liberals' ire has to do with racial issues. Helms spent his career frustrating, if not actively opposing, the civil rights movement. For this he has never apologized. If there is a fault to his memoir, it is that, with the exception of a single chapter, Helms elides racial politics almost entirely. When he does tackle the subject, this normally lucid writer retreats into euphemism. He writes, "I did not advocate segregation, and I did not advocate aggravation." Translated, this is an admission that Helms supported the status quo in the South — and the status quo was a racial caste system.

"Many good people who supported the principle of progress for everyone could not agree to the destruction of one citizen's freedom in order to convey questionable 'rights' to another," Helms writes. But which "questionable 'rights' " is he talking about here? The right to vote? The right to equal treatment under the law?

Helms, who retired after his fifth term ended in January 2003, may not have transcended the racial politics of the South. But his party has. Witness the speed with which

Republicans threw Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi overboard in December 2002 for saying the nation perhaps would have been better off if segregationist Strom Thurmond had been elected president in 1948. Or Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman's recent apology for his party's "Southern Strategy" of exploiting the grievances of white Southerners in the late 1960s.

No doubt Helms considers himself a good ol' Southern boy. But the truth is that his patrimony is national. When Helms entered the Senate in 1973, there were 56 Democrats, 42 Republicans, one Conservative, and one Independent. Today Helms is gone, but there are 55 Republicans, 44 Democrats, and one Independent. The country has swapped majorities in a little more than 30 years. Helms' intellectual — yes, intellectual — and political abilities had much to do with this shift. For a while, he was American conservatism's most prominent spokesman. It was a lonely job. But eventually his country's politics caught up with his convictions.

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