

Biographer reveals predictable, liberal bias against conservative stalwart

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I have read with great interest, and much disappointment, the book by professor William Link, "Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism."

While the book relates some interesting episodes from the life and professional career of Senator Jesse Helms, it ultimately fails to capture the character of the man, falling victim instead to the obvious, politically liberal bias of the author (a member of Historians for Obama). In fact, Link's admiration for one of the Senate's most liberal members (THE most liberal, according to the National Journal Survey in 2008) should serve as caution enough about the prejudiced liberal leanings that inevitably influenced his biography on one of the Senate's most conservative members.

Under the guise of serious scholarship, Link skews his presentation - in a way that actually reveals his own biased viewpoint - selectively picking and choosing what he would include and what he would ignore in order to perpetuate his preconceived slant on a man he never met.

It was my privilege to work with Senator Helms for 12 of his 30 years in the U.S. Senate, and I scarcely recognize the man Link portrays. I remember being interviewed by Link more than a year before the book was published in preparation for his biography on the senator.

At the time, he portrayed himself as a professional and disinterested historian, who wanted to write a factual and objective portrait of North Carolina's longest-serving senator whom he considered had been pivotal in the development of modern-day conservative politics.

Imagine my surprise when I read in the preface to his book that, in fact, he came to his project not with any sort of academic neutrality but rather with a fundamentally liberal prejudice. Link, who is now a professor in Florida, lived in North Carolina for much of the Senator's tenure, and he says that while a constituent of the Senator's, "I subscribed to his demonization; he represented everything that I dislike in modern politics, his policies represented polar opposites of everything I believed in."

Of Helms' first election in 1972, Link, who was a college student at the time, says he "regarded him as out of the political mainstream and of little importance: most people, especially in student circles of the 1970s, regarded him as something of a buffoon who would almost certainly not last longer than a single term."

That bias, finally confessed, is not confined to the preface, but drips from page after page. In fact, to a group editorial writers assembled in Chapel Hill earlier this year, Link acknowledged that he lived in North Carolina at the time of most of Helms' election campaigns (four out of five) and voted against Helms each time.

That's hardly the record of an impartial observer.

Link's dislike, distrust, and disagreement with Helms is obvious throughout.

For instance, any time there is a choice between believing what Helms said were his reasons or motivations for a particular position during his Senate years versus believing what a liberal Senate colleague or liberal editorial page writer charged, Link invariably chooses the most liberal, anti-Helms viewpoint.

Link frequently views Helms through a one-dimensional, racial prism. He attributes racial motivations, inevitably devious ones, to many of Helms' positions, and ignores all evidence of Helms' actual racial record of fairness and equal treatment - such as running one of the most integrated and racially diverse television stations of his era or hiring the first black American, of any party, on the professional staff of the U.S. Senate's Foreign Relations Committee.

Is it any wonder that Link's book is applauded by like-minded liberals, especially in academia, the media, and the Democratic Party (three groups Helms frequently battled)? Those who opposed Senator Helms' conservative philosophy, Christian faith, and support for traditional values will, no doubt, be heartened by this re-hash of presumptions about the Senator's motives and actions with the same, predictable chorus of critics, most with their own agendas. Note, for instance, how many of Link's sources (just skim the footnotes for confirmation) are liberal editorial writers and columnists, or liberal, usually Democratic, politicians, with whom the conservative Republican Helms frequently clashed. Link's interpretations continually put Senator Helms' actions in the most negative light, falsely concluding that courageous or controversial positions were taken in order to seek political advantage, when, in fact, he was standing against the prevailing winds, even earning the moniker "Senator No."

Jesse Helms was recognized during his Senate career, even by political opponents, as a creative legislator (and master parliamentarian) motivated by principled positions - invariably conservative ones, with which Link should just admit he disagrees. Helms was also renowned throughout his lifetime for his directness, candor, and honesty, traits that Link's version of events attempts to displace.

Link fails even to consider that Senator Helms' actions and motivations came from this core set of deeply-held convictions on principle - principles upon which our country was founded - such as the importance of personal responsibility, private property rights, and limited government.

Those wanting to fuel their own propensities toward a liberal leaning will, undoubtedly, find the book full of the examples they may find fulfilling to accomplish that purpose.

But a more thoughtful reader seeking a deeper insight into one of the late 20th Century's most courageous and controversial politicians - with even a modicum of biographical objectivity or historical context - will come away deeply disappointed.