

DAVID KEENE

The right's able helmsman

By David Keene

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A giant passed away last week. With the death of Jesse Helms, the last of the three men most responsible for converting the growing conservative movement of the '50s and '60s into a viable political movement is gone.

The other two were Barry Goldwater, who gave voice to the movement with his 1960 Republican Convention speech and run for the White House in 1964, and Ronald Reagan, who finally won the prize the movement had sought with Helms and Goldwater.

Helms's election to the Senate in 1970 shocked the liberal establishment. A radio and television commentator from Raleigh, N.C., who identified with conservatives, Jesse came to Washington determined to help build the movement, stand by his principles and do what he could to change things. He stayed on to become the conscience of conservatives, not only in the Senate but across the nation.

Helms built a political machine in North Carolina, signed direct-mail appeals that kick-started the conservative political infrastructure and set the stage for his friend Ronald Reagan's nomination and election in 1980. Without Helms, Reagan would never have made it to the White House.

In 1976 Helms saved a floundering Reagan campaign. Reagan had lost to Gerald Ford in New Hampshire and Florida. His campaign was broke, his followers dispirited and his managers were negotiating his surrender with President Ford's people.

Then everything changed when, thanks to Helms, Reagan won the North Carolina primary. He lost the nomination, but emerged not as the humiliated fringe candidate people were dismissing after the early primaries, but as the favorite in 1980.

I first met Helms before his Senate run and remained a friend and admirer from that day on. He was always ready to help his fellow conservatives and will be remembered even by many who disagreed with his views for his personal graciousness. Senate employees year after year voted him the senator who treated them best, and his personal concern for others was legendary.

During his first campaign for the Senate, Helms found himself late one evening waiting for a train and struck up a conversation with a college student whom many might have dismissed as "a left-wing hippie."

The young man was not a Helms supporter, but Jesse found him both interesting and sincere and from that moment decided that, if elected, he would never refuse to meet with young people.

As a senator, Helms's schedule required that he often refuse to meet with lobbyists, but he never turned down a request to meet with a student. Young people weren't shunted off to assistants and interns. They got to meet with the senator directly, and before he left the Senate he had met

personally with more than 100,000.

When he learned that I had a granddaughter, Helms reminded me that he'd met my children when they were young and urged me to bring young Casey up to see him. Finally, when she was about 4 or 5, I did so. Within minutes, the senator had opened up one of the imposing cabinets in his office, pulled out some toys and was playing with her on the floor of the office.

The two got along famously, but after 20 minutes or so, the senator's secretary interrupted to inform her boss that his next appointment had been cooling his heels in the outer office for some time. Helms told the secretary several times that the guest could continue to wait, as playing with Casey was far too important to interrupt. The fellow waiting was Boutros Boutros-Ghali, then secretary general of the United Nations.

Casey was, of course, delighted and for years slept with the picture of her and "her" Senator beside her bed.

Four or five years later, Helms was at a reception in my suite at the hotel at which the Conservative Political Action Conference was being held, and Casey and her mother were in the adjoining bedroom getting dressed for dinner. Casey heard Helms's voice and wanted to say hello to her senator, whom she hadn't seen since that day in his office four or five years earlier. Her mother, convinced Casey would be embarrassed as there was no way Helms would remember, tried to stop her, but she ran into the suite, jumped up on Jesse's lap and hugged him.

The senator hugged her back and said, "It's great to see you again, Casey, but you've grown so and haven't been up to see me." Casey now knew that Jesse Helms was "her" senator. As her political beliefs and experiences grow, Casey and thousands of other young Americans will learn that Sen. Helms was their champion.

For every conservative who had the privilege of knowing and admiring the gentleman from North Carolina, Jesse Helms was their senator as well and will always be remembered for what he did and for who he was.

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