

Defending Jesse

By: Bernie Reeves

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In 1981 I fielded a call from a professor at NC State who told me he detested [Jesse Helms](#). But he said he felt compelled to tell his own personal story about the Senator. He told me he had recently taught in Poland on a fellowship where he met and married a Polish girl. He returned to the US and arranged for his new wife to join him later.

Then revolutionary fever hit Poland, resulting in brutal repression by the communist government. The new wife could not leave. In a panic, the professor contacted the State Department, his Congressman and other sources to no avail. Not only would they not help, they acted as if his problem was a nuisance. At the end of his tether, he broke down and called the office of Jesse Helms. He told them he did not support the Senator but he needed help.

The staffer who took the call told him they would call him back in 24 hours. Sure enough, the call came right on time: “You can pick up your wife at the Raleigh-Durham Airport the day after tomorrow.”

And that’s just one example of the efficiency and bi-partisanship of Jesse Helms. He didn’t simply help his supporters; he helped all North Carolinians with no questions asked.

Back then, I told this story to defend Jesse Helms to over-educated newcomers arriving in the Triangle in the late 70s and through the 80s who needed to understand the Senator to understand North Carolina. [Hal Crowther](#) was beginning his column for my weekly *Spectator* and even he came around – somewhat – summing up Jesse as a pit bull tied up to the axle of an 18-wheeler with the owner proudly saying “ain’t he a pisser”? Or, more succinctly: “He may be a SOB, but he’s our SOB.”

I never thought he was a SOB, but I did agree he was indeed “ours,” another manifestation of that peculiar North Carolina breed of individualistic and effective political figures. In a public television program of clips from old interviews with Senator Helms, [Billy Graham](#) came up – and there it is again, another example of a pure product of the Old North State like Jesse. Evangelists from every other region of the country exude a greasy aura, but not Billy Graham. And Jesse possessed that same preternatural honesty and directness peculiar to North Carolina – a characteristic that flummoxed his critics.

And Jesse was not ashamed or uncomfortable wearing his religion on his sleeve. Most people are embarrassed to follow his example, but underneath they respected Jesse for his unashamed spirituality. The “secular humanists” on campus and in the media during Jesse’s reign as Senator found that attacking his belief in God only increased his popularity.

I remember when North Carolina-born *New York Times* columnist [Tom Wicker](#) invented the nickname “Senator No” in a piece he wrote condemning Jesse for filibustering against a bill that Wicker said removed funding for handicapped children. Of course, that’s not true. Jesse was against a huge omnibus spending bill, not helping children. But Wicker didn’t know that

Jesse and his wife Dot had adopted a handicapped child. Jesse never responded to Wicker by using his son as leverage. He just did what he thought was right. When Raleigh attorney Hugh Cannon accused Jesse during a campaign of leaving First Baptist Church in downtown because there was a black parishioner, he demonstrated why the Democrats didn't know how to handle Jesse. For one thing, many blacks have traditionally attended downtown Raleigh white churches; and for another, the reason the Helms family transferred to Hayes Barton Baptist Church was to be near programs provided for their adopted son. Hugh Cannon was never heard from again politically.

For these reasons and many others, when it comes to United States Senators there is not another like Jesse. He was an authentic original, and, like Billy Graham, not once did a whiff of scandal or corruption come close to touching him. Honesty made him great – and honesty made him hated by those who didn't agree with him. By never caving in on his principles, whether you agreed with him or not, he gave his enemies fits – and often irritated his friends. This is the quality that provided him the edge with voters for 30 years.

Jesse was also funny, something his detractors find hard to accept. When prodded by a CBS reporter in 1977 about Missouri [Senator Tom Eagleton](#)'s bill to abolish the tobacco stabilization program, Jesse responded: "Ole Tom reminds me of a man [Senator Sam Ervin](#) told me about: 'He don't know nothing and he ain't got that right.'" Or his famous riposte when asked his opinion about affirmative action: "When you see a turtle on top of a fence post, you know it didn't get there by itself."

Jesse is despised by the Left for his alleged racism, but his feelings on the subject were made clear in the public television interviews he granted in the mid-90s. In response to the racist label, he simply said integration was happening anyway. His objection was the process of forcing the issue by Congress and the courts. In other words, for example, bussing – a dictatorial mandate that has undone public schools in the South.

His critics assumed white people were simply racist if they objected to forced bussing. The real truth Jesse recognized was they didn't like the government rearranging society by fiat. No state legislature nor the Congress ever passed laws to force bussing. It was court-ordered dictatorial social engineering that went against the grain of the American ethic. His objection to tyranny is one reason Jesse retained his seat for five terms, despite opposition from powerful forces across the state and the nation.

Jesse obviously understood the underlying and often inexpressible feelings of North Carolinians and other Southerners, and he applied the same instinct to Americans as a whole in his ornery confrontations with the US State Department and the United Nations. He and [Ronald Reagan](#) were the tag-team champions of freedom for expressing the true feelings of the people of the country when it came to the duplicitous dealings of our diplomatic missions. The State Department has never cleansed itself of its world socialist doctrines, requiring its diplomats to diminish our natural status as the superpower of the world in order to please our so-called friends across the globe, what we call multiculturalism today.

Jesse and Reagan made it clear who we were and the Cold War came to an abrupt end with the collapse of the Soviet Union, ending 70 years of toxic confrontation – military and ideological. Simultaneously, the dynamic duo – with Reagan as president and Helms on the

[Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#) (and later its chairman, a job he turned down at first stating he couldn't take the post until he fulfilled his promise to save the tobacco program while Chairman of Agriculture – which he did before taking over Foreign Relations) informed the United Nations it must alter its anti-American policies or the US would withhold its dues, which constituted nearly one-half of the world body's budget. The UN changed, funding was restored and Jesse was invited to address the General Assembly where he received tumultuous applause.

Jesse, like all of us, was imperfect. But he never wavered from the values he learned in the small town of Monroe, NC. One of the key qualities he absorbed was courtesy, a dimension often criticized by the Left. [James Reston, Jr.](#), son of the former *New York Times* columnist, sojourned at UNC-Chapel Hill in the 70s and 80s and concluded that North Carolinians, while on the surface less racist than other Southerners, were actually guilty of being more racist because of a veneer of "civility" that fooled others to make them think we were more "progressive." Reston's disingenuous sleight of hand was used by critics to diminish Jesse's courtesy to all people as a cover for his inbred racism.

Actually, Jesse's courtesy was natural. We in North Carolina do have better manners and polite qualities, but not to cover up a mean streak underneath as Reston and the Left perceive. North Carolina had few slaves compared to the rest of the South and has always maintained an egalitarian attitude on all issues. Certainly, racism exists – as it does everywhere on the planet – but overall Jesse represented the genuine nature of Tar Heels: civil and courteous, but willing to fight to the death over principle.

The race issue came up naturally during Jesse's two contests in 1990 and 1996 for his Senate seat against [Harvey Gantt](#), a black former mayor of Charlotte. Jesse ran ads depicting a white man losing a job to a black man due to affirmative action. But it was in the gargantuan race against the politically ubiquitous Jim Hunt in 1984 that the race issue gained national attention over the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. Was it racist for Jesse to fight against the holiday? Is it racist for non-black Americans to think the idea was a manifestation of affirmative action on a grand historical scale? The point is Jesse won in the most expensive Senate race in US history at that time against an all-out local and national Democrat juggernaut to kick him out of office.

His opponents learned you couldn't beat Jesse holding your breath until you turned purple with self-righteousness over doctrinaire issues that deep-down people don't believe. In the end, more people liked Jesse than hated him – with nearly no one in between.

SOURCE: <http://bernier Reevesonline.wordpress.com/2009/10/31/defending-jesse/>

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