

Young: Helms farewell on big holiday

By Peter B. Young, local columnist
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Independence Day is always a good time for reflection on our unique assortment of blessings. This past Independence Day was no exception.

Independence Day began on a sad note this year, when word arrived from Raleigh, North Carolina that retired U.S. Senator Jesse Helms, a former boss of mine (and a good one), had passed away in the pre-dawn hours. Leave it to Helms, always the consummate professional, to depart this earthly vale of tears on Independence Day!

Within just a couple of hours after the newswires started humming, staffers at The Jesse Helms Center in Wingate, N.C. unearthed the interesting fact that at least two U.S. Presidents, Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams, had also passed away on long-gone Independence Days. One can only imagine how the the folks, the so-called "Jessecrats" in the core Helms constituency, chuckled their appreciation for this final manifestation of the Senator's gift for relevant timing.

Yes, the staffers at The Jesse Helms Center, and all those "Jessecrats" in North Carolina and elsewhere had mused over the years on the possibility of a Helms presidency. But the stars were never in appropriate alignment for that to happen.

So Jesse Helms, the country boy son of a police chief from Monroe, N.C., simply went about his business in the marbled halls of the U.S. Senate day after day, in his later years traveling from committee room to his office to Senate Chambers for a quorum call in his fancy, motorized wheel chair. If held up by a swarm of visiting tourists, the Senator liked to shout good-naturedly: "Beep, beep!" And then, with a cheerful wave, he would motor right on through.

Helms' final departure had been long anticipated. He had suffered from several debilitating ailments in recent years, and shortly after his retirement from five full terms in the U.S. Senate, that's 30 years, went into a long-term care facility in Raleigh where he and his family patiently awaited the inevitable end.

Nevertheless, and no matter for how long such seminal events can be anticipated, the utter finality of death always comes as a sobering shock to those who are, for the moment, left behind. But just how appropriate was it for Jesse Helms to depart on Independence Day? From here, I would have to say that it was very appropriate, indeed. Helms, as he himself frequently noted, did not go to Washington in order to win a popularity contest. Nor did he go to Washington in order to create a new and different Republican Party.

No, he went to Washington to voice the concerns, the hopes, the fears of the down-home country folk in North Carolina. Yes, those were white folks, the aforementioned Jessecrats. And, yes, that made it difficult for Helms to work out the new equations, the new politics that

would be most appropriate for the South's extraordinary, still continuing march towards genuine equality and harmony between the races.

But in the final years of his Washington service, when he was chairman of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee, country boy Jesse Helms learned that millions of black people in Africa had the HIV (AIDS) virus and would surely die for lack of appropriate medications. The messenger who carried this awful news to Washington was none other than the man named Bono, lead singer for the world-renowned rock group, U2.

Associates can attest that Helms goes to his grave today as proud of his work with Bono against AIDS in Africa as he was for any of the other achievements in his long, endlessly-storied, endlessly controversial career.

So what did I finally end up doing this past Independence Day? I did what I always do. I had a couple of beers, grilled some hamburgers and hot dogs, waved a flag, took a nap, you know the drill. And, yes, I thought about those two years in the WRAL-TV newsroom in Raleigh, NC, and our daily sessions with our boss, station V.P. Jesse Helms.

Let's hope we Americans of all colors can continue to celebrate Independence Day, even as the storm clouds roll in and the skies darken except, of course, out in California where the very land itself remains on fire. In the meantime, God speed, Jesse, God speed.

Peter B. Young writes from Marlborough.