

Senator No



IT WAS NEW YEAR'S DAY 1973 when Dot and I officially moved to Washington, twenty years to the day after our first move there, but this time the girls were grown and our son, Charles, was in college. The two of us had truly turned a page.

January 3 was the day of my official swearing-in. This event took place in the Senate chamber, before the full Senate and a crowded gallery of guests. New and newly reelected Senators went up in groups of four to take the oath of office and be sworn in by Vice President Spiro Agnew. Senator Sam Ervin, the senior Senator from North Carolina and a man for whom I had the greatest respect and affection, escorted me when it was my turn to be sworn in. That moment was unforgettable. As I turned to retake my seat, I caught sight of my father in the gallery, along with Dot and the rest of the family. It was a proud moment for all of us, and a moving one.

My father had taught me much about life—so much that I felt free to go back to him for added wisdom whenever I needed to think through a decision or a course of action. I expected to be picking up the phone to call him often, but, sadly, that was not to be. His presence in that gallery to see me take my place as a United States Senator took on even more significance for me when he died just one year later.

We didn't have long to celebrate my swearing-in, because Dot and I immediately had to fly back to Raleigh to be present for the inauguration of Governor Jim Holshouser. We had a full schedule, including being part of the receiving

line at one reception where we started greeting people at 7:30 p.m. and didn't stop until after midnight, after we'd shaken more than four thousand hands!

The next evening we had our own victory party with the people who had worked so hard in the Helms for Senate campaign. It was a genuine pleasure to greet those five hundred good friends, and to let them know that I had been elected because of *their* dedication, that my work in Washington would be for them and all the citizens of North Carolina—work that would not always be popular with the liberal opposition back home, especially with the major newspapers.

In 1978 the *Raleigh News & Observer* dubbed me “Senator No.” It wasn't meant as a compliment, but I certainly took it as one. There was plenty to stand up and say “No!” to during my first term in the U.S. Senate. In fact, that was why had I run for the U.S. Senate—to try to derail the freight train of liberalism that was gaining speed toward its destination of “government-run” everything, paid for with big tax bills and record debt.

My goal, when Dot and I decided I would run for the Senate, was to stick to my principles and stand up for conservative ideals. I wasn't interested in a popularity contest and surely didn't care about anything the big newspapers called me. My experience with them extended over a lifetime.

I saw how they constantly ridiculed conservative ideas and conservative people. By some twist of logic they decided that the way to be “progressive” was to toss aside the underpinnings of our society. Anyone who thought differently was dismissed as “out of touch.” I've been called a “troglydte” on more than one occasion when I angered some writer or some group who wanted me to get out of *their* way and let them proceed with their unrestrained liberal agenda. (One of the earliest editorials I ever read written by editors who didn't like something I'd said or done was in response to a column I'd written in *The Tarheel Banker*. (*The Charlotte Observer* ran that editorial back in the late 1950s.)

Looking through their liberal glasses, the papers certainly presented a distorted view of reality. It had begun as early as my first Senate campaign, when the press took a look at my campaign and decided the slogan “He's One of Us” was some sort of attack on the nationality of my opponent's parents.

But as it turned out, the bad press back home was just the beginning of the fire I was to draw throughout my career. So aside from making a collection of all the political cartoons I could get my hands on, I quickly tuned out the criti-

cism. A gentleman I knew back in Wingate often said that it wasn't a good idea to get in an argument with folks who bought ink by the barrel and paper by the ton, and I agreed with that.

I decided not to waste my time debating my critics. Over the years, I saved the U.S. Treasury a lot of money on press secretaries, until I eventually had to have one to deal with the deluge of media requests.

My staff, however, wasn't always as thick-skinned as I was. On one occasion I had to tell a new aide who was all set to fire off a response to a highly critical editorial, "Son, just so you understand: I don't care what *The New York Times* says about me. And nobody I care about cares what *The New York Times* says about me." As we worked together a while, the young fellow came to understand that I answer first to my Creator, then to my conscience. If that brought conflict or created some pressure, that was the price of doing business the way I thought was right.

Too many politicians think that the road to success lies in being "open." Too often that is simply another word for "hollow." I believe leaders must have principles, and must stand up for them.

I told my young staff that the way to be successful in politics and remain true to your principles is to know the distinction between your principles and your preferences. On your principles, you should never yield; you should be prepared to be defeated. Nobody likes to be defeated, but you should let everybody know in the most articulate and thoughtful and civil way you can (you don't go out and pick fights with people) that in certain matters that you define as matters of principle you *will not budge*, you *cannot* yield, you *will not* compromise. If you don't have the votes or the winning argument, then you stand to be defeated and rolled over, and you'll just have to come back another day.

But on circumstances that are your *preferences*, you'd better be prepared to compromise, because that's where you can demonstrate that you can engage with other people. Then you can, in fact, operate in the political realm.

So make a clear distinction anytime an issue arises—is this a point of principle or is this a point of preference? An awful lot of politicians never understand the difference. They compromise their principles and they fight to the death on their preferences. They end up, of course, being frustrated and unsuccessful—and failures at achieving their objectives.

When I took my seat in the Senate, there were forty-two Republicans, one Conservative, one Independent, and sixty Democrats. I probably was not much like many of those Republicans. They enjoyed being considered moderates,

even liberal in their own politics. Plus, they were so outnumbered that they had become comfortable with the idea that they simply would never gain control of the U.S. Senate. Instead, they created a sort of gentlemen's club, for which I had no affinity. They didn't want to make any waves; I wanted to drain the swamp.

I believed then, and I believe now, that people who will not surrender their principles to assure their popularity can get things done. I did not have time to waste because there were critical issues facing us, not the least of which was the direction of the war in Vietnam and the negotiations for peace. I hoped to find a way for conservatives to work together without regard for their party labels, and to force change.

Thanks to Senator Jim Allen, I learned that my greatest ally in changing the Senate was the Senate itself. The rules of the Senate made it possible to bring to the floor issues that most Senators would just as soon have ignored. One of their revered traditions was to dispose quietly of almost any issue that they didn't want on their voting record. Controversial bills languished in committees or were disposed of in anonymous voice votes. Constituents often did not have the faintest idea that they were routinely reelecting people who voted in ways totally opposite to the way the constituents mistakenly assumed they were voting.

I believed then, and I still believe, that people, especially Senators, should have the courage of their convictions. I thought, and I will forever believe, that people should be "on record" about things that really matter to most Americans (e.g., for starters, school prayer, spending the people's money on obscenities, killing unborn children, raising taxes, giving aid to our country's enemies, protecting the Boy Scouts, and an end to a self-perpetuating welfare system, and so on and so on).

I thought then, and still think, that people want their Senators to fulfill their constitutional duty in international relations. The U.S. Senate had become ineffectual and left far too much in the hands of the staff of the State Department. Career diplomats had been given years of unfettered management; therefore and thereby, they had succeeded in creating an out-of-control bureaucracy that deserved its nickname, Foggy Bottom.

My staffers have laughingly but proudly told me that one of the most dreaded phrases on Capitol Hill was "Senator Helms has an amendment." Over the years I offered literally hundreds of them. Some, of course, did not pass, and my detractors, including newspaper editors, assumed that such losses were failures. In fact, they were small *victories* on the way to big ones.

I *wanted* Senators to take stands and do it publicly. I was willing to leave it

to their constituents to decide what would happen next. When Senators were required, by circumstances, to stand up and vote so the people at home could see for themselves how they really felt about the issues, it rattled a lot of cages back in Washington. And when Senators had to run on their records instead of their rhetoric, things really began to change.

In 1973, when I went to the Senate, conservatives in Congress could have met comfortably in a phone booth. (There were actually more conservatives over on the Democratic side.) Senator Mike Mansfield was the Majority Leader and Senator Hugh Scott was the Republican Leader.

In those days, freshman Senators were to be seen and not heard. (That is not the case in today's Senate!) I knew that tradition was one more way of maintaining the status quo, so I rose to the Senate floor to make my first speech on January 11, just eight days after being sworn in. (It was a five-minute talk on an issue of great importance to North Carolina farmers: a defense of tobacco price supports as a part of the overall agricultural program.)

The first time I took the gavel to preside over the Senate was January 26. By October 10, I had presided over more than one hundred hours of deliberations and was presented with a gavel by the Senate pages, in a ceremony in the Vice President's Capitol office. I was the first Republican Senator ever to win that award.

The lessons I learned while presiding over the Senate were already being applied on the Senate floor. I knew the value of amendments and how to keep things from being caught up in committees. I knew when and how to make the call for a voice vote so Senators would have to attach their name to the issues they supported or chose not to support. I knew how to introduce substitute bills and how to recruit cosigners.

In April 1973, we helped sustain a veto on the flawed Vocational Rehabilitation Act by introducing a substitute bill that provided appropriate assistance to people who needed this sort of help. We were certain of White House approval after it had been passed by the Congress.

By November I was picking up steam. On the twenty-ninth I introduced three amendments to the Social Security Act and demanded a vote by the Senate. One of those amendments, calling for a balanced budget, was tabled by a vote of 46 to 43, but our little group of conservative Senators were very pleased by such a close vote on an amendment offered for the very first time, and by a freshman Senator.

From my arrival in the Senate, I worked closely with Jim Buckley, the Conservative Senator from New York, and I recall sitting on the floor with him on January 22, 1973—the day the Supreme Court ruled on *Roe v. Wade*. A page delivered the news report from the Associated Press wire just a few feet off the Senate floor. Jim and I immediately agreed to work together to do all we could to oppose this misguided and tragic decision.

That court decision also led all of the conservatives, regardless of party, to come together to form the Senate Steering Committee. I had noticed the way Ted Kennedy would come to the floor, with several Senators following, prepared to talk all afternoon. They were organized and had a plan.

Several of us thought that *we* needed to formally organize a response, so the Senate Steering Committee was started. Today the Senate Steering Committee is made up of about thirty-five conservative Senators (all Republican right now). They meet for lunch every Wednesday, to talk with each other and to hear from invited speakers who come to present important ideas.

By the 1994 midterm election, when Republicans took control of both the House and Senate, the conservative movement was growing stronger by the day. Its accomplishments became obvious. Some liberal Democrats even *tried* to sound like conservatives on those Sunday-morning talk shows. I enjoyed watching them struggle to explain away the decades of tax-and-spend that had finally caught up with them.