

OPINION

How Jesse Helms Made a Difference

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If Ronald Reagan was the sunny and optimistic face of modern conservatism, the uncompromisingly defiant exemplar of it was Jesse Helms, who died yesterday at age 86.

While Reagan has undergone a revisionist makeover by many historians who now recognize his accomplishments, Helms is still the conservative liberals most love to hate. But while they still disdain his views, many liberal groups are now using their own forms of the rhetorical and campaign techniques that Helms honed to perfection.



Jesse Helms and Ronald Reagan in 1983.

Jesse Helms was an influential television commentator in North Carolina when he decided to leave the Democratic Party, winning a U.S. Senate seat as a Republican in 1972. He went on to win four more terms, with a reputation as the Senate's most principled warrior on behalf of social conservatism, anti-Communism, limits on union power, and an assertive foreign policy that rejected State Department caution. Like Reagan, many of his views appear to have been validated. Others, such as his blind spot on racial issues and mean-spirited comments against gays were troublesome, but even the stubborn Helms made moves to modify his image in those areas late in life.

Two events early in his Senate career showcased Helms's unflinching nature and his political skills. In 1975, he engineered a visit to the U.S. by Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn over the objections of the State Department, which forbade its own employees from attending a major Solzhenitsyn speech in Washington. State also blocked a proposed visit to the White House, leading Helms to accuse President Gerald Ford of "cowering timidly for fear of offending Communists."

That incident helped spur Reagan to challenge Ford for the GOP nomination the next year. Reagan lost the first five primaries, and he entered the North Carolina contest broke and under pressure to pull out. But Helms and his chief strategist Tom Ellis refused to give up. They employed Helms's huge, direct-mail list to build a grass-roots army of volunteers and raise money to air 30-minute speeches by Reagan across the state.

Emphasizing the Panama Canal "giveaway" and smaller government, Reagan won an upset victory and was able to battle Ford all the way to the GOP convention. He showed such strength at the convention that Ford invited him to deliver off-the-cuff remarks to the delegates. Reagan was so inspiring that some of Ford's own delegates exclaimed, "We

just nominated the wrong candidate." Reagan later acknowledged how Helms's intervention rescued his political career.

But that level of success eluded Helms in a Senate where he was almost always outvoted. Rather than seek compromise, he staked out firm positions that attracted publicity for his causes. He was often able to block appointments he considered too liberal and was the first to highlight United Nations corruption, an issue on which he was clearly ahead of his time.

He also stumbled. His anticommunist fervor led him to back authoritarian regimes in Chile and Argentina far more than he should have. His 1983 opposition to a Martin Luther King holiday – he railed against King's associations with communists – was myopic and a throwback to a discredited past.

The issue of race will always cast a shadow on Helms's legacy. He could never understand why he was viewed by many as a bigot, having run one of the most integrated TV stations in the South and often hiring blacks on his staff. His criticisms of affirmative action and forced busing were on the mark. But as conservative scholar John Hood notes, "he failed to marry every criticism of government overreaching with calls for the South's social and moral transformation and clear denunciations of racist business owners."

Indeed, the mainstream media rarely put Helms's career in context the way they did, for example, with Sam Ervin, a Democrat who served with Helms in the Senate from North Carolina before retiring in 1975. Ervin was the leading legal strategist against Civil Rights legislation, and he largely crafted the Southern Manifesto against *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court case that ruled school segregation unconstitutional. But Ervin was the man who chaired the Watergate hearings that helped bring down Richard Nixon, and his views on civil rights were almost never mentioned. Both Helms and Ervin were courtly, principled conservatives. Only one became a cartoon media villain.

Contrary to his reputation, Helms did change his mind. For his first decade in office he opposed aid to Israel and in 1982, after that nation invaded Lebanon, called for "shutting down" relations. But after learning more about Israel's security fears during a visit there in 1985, and receiving assurances that officials there could support some military sales to moderate Arab nations, he became Israel's stalwart ally. "It was a complete switch," recalls Morris Amitay, former executive director of AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby.

Helms also softened on both AIDS and Africa. He developed an unlikely friendship with the rock star Bono, who convinced Helms to back AIDS funding and alleviate poverty in Africa by channeling more foreign aid through private sources.

But that kind of détente was rare. Most liberals delighted in baiting Helms and he reciprocated: He crowed about how disappointed CBS anchor Dan Rather looked in announcing his upset victory on election night in 1990. But liberals did pay attention to Helms, and gradually adopted some of his methods.

It was Helms who first sent his own foreign policy advisers overseas to second-guess the executive branch's foreign policy. Many liberals have no qualms in doing the same today. One liberal consultant told me he learned from Helms's ability to distill complicated ideas to a level that connected with ordinary people. His mastery of new media techniques and technology convinced many liberals they had to invest in the Internet and build up the passions of their base.

Jesse Helms was a major influence on American conservatism, but his career provides a blueprint for anyone who represents an embattled minority viewpoint. You can, with persistence and unflinching determination, change the political odds in your favor.

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