

Jesse Helms' Legacy
Dr. Larry Arnn
President of Hillsdale College

The great Jesse Helms, sorely missed in the Senate of the United States, has written a book entitled *Here's Where I Stand* (Random House, 2005). This book will give you an idea what the best Senators have been like. It will do this because it shows the ground on which they stood. It is a good idea right now, when both political parties have wandered off that ground, to read this book and remember.

Jesse Helms grew up during the Great Depression in the small town of Monroe, North Carolina. His father, the town's fire chief, taught him the importance of helping others, and of making the most of opportunity. "The genius of America is not in *winning* something or in being given it," Helms writes, "it is in having the opportunity to strive and work and *earn* the things we really want."

Helms found his way to the Senate through journalism and broadcast news. He ran as a dark horse in 1972, and he won his first campaign. He would serve in the Senate for thirty years.

Influential for decades even in the minority, Helms avoided the airs of the powerful. Needing a dinner jacket, he bought used. He read every bill. He met 100,000 young people from his home state.

He was a bastion for hard causes in victory or defeat. The Panama Canal is gone (China now owns major installations at both ends) despite him. So too is school prayer. We do not yet have private social security accounts, or the end of *Roe v. Wade*, but he kept these causes alive. The Soviet Union is gone, and he delivered hammer blows against it. Reagan found in him a firm friend – or sometimes a conscience of stubborn clarity.

Helms was known to be tough. Indeed he was the scourge of his adversaries. Still he had that North Carolina wit. Once after Ted Kennedy had declaimed loudly and at length, Helms responded: "Let me adjust my hearing aid. It could not accommodate the decibels of the Senator from Massachusetts. I can't match him in decibels or Jezebels, or anything else, apparently."

Jesse Helms love of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. This is best exemplified in one of his greatest acts, a speech he gave to the United Nations Security Council on January 20, 2000. As Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Helms was the first Senator to address that body. He went there to give it a lesson not in the use, but in the source of political power.

In a beautiful passage, Senator Helms reminded the United Nations of the basis of political legitimacy, and of the fact that the United Nations does not have it, of itself.

He said, "What the Secretary-General calls 'rights beyond borders,' we in America call 'inalienable rights.' We are endowed with those 'inalienable rights,' as Thomas Jefferson proclaimed in our Declaration of Independence, not by kings or deposits, but by our own Creator.

"The sovereignty of nations must be respected. But nations derive their sovereignty – their legitimacy – from the consent of the governed. Thus it follows that nations can lose their legitimacy when they rule without consent of the governed; they deservedly discard their sovereignty by brutally oppressing their people."

The consent, of the governed, was won by the Senator from North Carolina five times. And in representing his state, he betrayed neither his own principles nor those of his country.