

The Washington Post

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Leader With a 'Lone-Wolf' Rap

Saturday, January 11, 2003; Page A19

A Jan. 5 front-page story portrayed Jesse Helms as a relic of a bygone era that most Republicans were glad to see come to an end. Truth be told, Helms is more in the Republican mainstream today, as he leaves the Senate, than he was when he arrived. And it is not because he mellowed with age or moved to the center but because he stood his ground -- and the Republican Party, the Senate and the world moved in his direction.

When Helms came to Washington in 1973, he was not just a member of the minority but also a minority within his own party. Back then, the "vast right-wing conspiracy" could hold its meetings in a phone booth.

By 1994, when he took over as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Republicans were in the majority and conservatives were the majority of the Republican caucus. And the senator who had made his career as the lonely opposition in 99 to 1 votes found himself on the winning side of large, often bipartisan majorities -- and successfully implementing a conservative foreign policy agenda. Consider:

- When Helms led the Senate opposition to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, proponents could not garner a simple majority, much less the supermajority needed for ratification.
- He fought the flawed Kyoto global warming treaty, which the Senate rejected in a resolution that passed 95 to 0.
- Helms fought the International Criminal Court, and his legislation, the American Service Members Protection Act -- which bars any U.S. cooperation with the court -- became law with overwhelming bipartisan support.
- He led the effort in the Senate to bring former Cold War adversaries Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic into the NATO alliance.
- Helms fought the "U.N. empowerment" agenda of former secretary general Boutros Boutros Ghali, and his U.N. reform legislation, the "Helms-Biden Law," passed the House and Senate by overwhelming majorities.
- He stopped the Clinton administration from concluding a new Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia to tie the hands of the next president. Today, the Bush administration has withdrawn from the treaty and has scheduled initial deployment of ballistic missile defenses for 2004.

So what made Helms stand out as such a lone wolf, in spite of this record? He was willing to take on issues no one else wanted to touch, and he did not care about controversy or criticism.

In 1995, when I was just starting as his spokesman on the Foreign Relations Committee, the Clinton administration was blocking Helms's plan to restructure the State Department. He responded by putting all State Department nominations on hold. The New York Times then ran an editorial accusing him of hostage-taking.

Eager to prove myself, I prepared a hard-hitting letter to the editor and took it down to his office. He read it, patted me on the shoulder and said: "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."

That, in a nutshell, was the secret to Jesse Helms's success. He answered only to his conscience and his Creator -- and he was willing to take the heat. That is why Senate Republicans will miss him -- and why his detractors are so glad to see him go.

But before they start popping the champagne corks, they should consider two uncomfortable thoughts: First, if the above record is any indication, it is not Helms who represents the views of a bygone era but his critics. And second, over the course of 30 years, hundreds of young conservatives have served in his Senate office and are now deployed across all levels of the U.S. government. Yes, Jesse Helms may be gone, but his disciples are not. They will be influencing U.S. policy for decades to come.

-- Marc A. Thiessen

The writer was spokesman for

Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) on the

Senate Foreign Relations Committee

from 1995 to 2001.