

Lessons from Jesse Helms: honesty, integrity, courage

A Personal Editorial from Editor and Publisher Tom Boney, Jr.,
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As someone who had the privilege to work with former U.S. Senator Jesse Helms for 12 years during the 1970's and 1980's, I had many occasions to observe and learn from this great man who died on July 4.

Other staff alumni have shared stories over the past few days, and I cannot resist adding some of my favorites that underscore his adherence to conservative principles – and his eloquent and diligent advocacy of those principles – his honesty, integrity, and courage.

On the personal side, he was equally well known for his polite and courtly Southern manner, his compassion, and his acts of kindness – traits which were a surprise to some, especially political opponents, who tended to view him solely through a prism of political ideology.

I'll keep my personal kindness illustrations to one, and it is a unique one that stems from his pre-Senate career – although we heard about it only years afterwards. In 1984, my wife Carol and I were in the delivery room of Sibley Hospital in Washington, D.C. Carol had just given birth to our first son, Evans, and the doctor was James Powers. I had liked Dr. Powers from the outset because of the Reagan memorabilia in his office when we visited and the fact that he had gone to undergraduate or medical school at UNC, as I recall, and he was from North Carolina.

What I didn't know was the story he told us as the nurses were caring for newborn Evans. When Dr. Powers was graduating from a Raleigh high school in the 1960's (before camcorders and video players), he was to give one of the speeches at graduation – he was the valedictorian, I think he said. But his mother was ill with cancer, and she couldn't come to hear her son's address. Helms, then serving as a vice president at WRAL-TV, had heard of the situation and sent a crew to the school to film young Powers' address, so that it could be shown to his mother. Powers had obviously never forgotten that act of kindness, and neither will we.

If ever an article or book is printed with the title or theme of “the secret Jesse Helms,” I will know it is fiction – or a fraud – because my experience, without exception, was of a man whose honesty and integrity were as alike in private as in public. North Carolina's state motto is *esse quam videri*, which is Latin for “to be, rather than to seem.” Jesse Helms was the embodiment of “being,” not just seeming.

The advantage of being true

Helms was so well known for his honesty that he could be considered in the same category with George Washington, who could never tell a lie. My favorite illustration is when newer members of his staff would come to the Senator to ask how they should respond to news reporters or other senators' staffs about his position, or a certain amendment he was offering (Helms' amendments were frequent in those days) or some other issue. I knew what answer he would give. “Just tell them,” he would start out, and then outline for them the factual details that they already knew about the pending measure. “It has the advantage of being true.”

He didn't camouflage – and didn't want his staff members to disguise – the purposes or reasons for his position on any topic. “Always do right,” Mark Twain once said. “This will gratify some people and astonish the rest.” Different sets of people were often, respectively, gratified and astonished by Senator Helms.

Integrity and courage

During a 5-term, 30-year career, his political enemies leveled many strident criticisms at Helms – and even manufactured a few others. But even the most vitriolic critics rarely attempted much of an

assault on his personal integrity. It would have fallen flat. Unlike political scandals that have unfolded around other politicians, during his terms and since, with Helms there was never a whiff of financial impropriety, “selling” his vote, kowtowing to lobbyists, or otherwise betraying the public’s trust. Not in exchange for money. Not for power. Not for anything.

Closely related to integrity is courage – and in Helms’ case, a depth of conviction. Probably the trait I found most admirable – it was pretty rare then and seems to have become almost extinct since he retired – was Helms’ ability and willingness to stand against the prevailing winds. When he was convinced his position was the right one, he was willing to take a stand regardless of whether anyone else would stand with him; willing to stand up regardless of how powerful were the forces arrayed against him; willing to stand up regardless of the potential, or perceived, political consequences; and willing to stand up even when it meant disagreeing with his own friends, party, or president.

A couple of examples come most readily to mind.

Just before Christmas in 1982, Helms was among a handful of senators standing up against their own Republican leadership (in the majority for only two years) and their own popular president, Ronald Reagan, in resisting a Reagan Administration proposal to increase the federal gasoline tax by 5 cents per gallon. Senators wanted to adjourn for the holidays, and grew increasingly aggravated – some bitterly so – with Helms for opposing the gas tax hike and tying up the Senate in the process.

Helms was particularly mindful of the impact on North Carolina truckers (the state was, and is, one of the leading centers for long-distance trucking), who would have to absorb the higher tax, and he kept up his strenuous opposition – even after President Reagan called and asked him to relent. The senators finally overcame Helms’ opposition, enacted the tax increase, and headed back to their home states. Helms drove back to North Carolina, feeling dejected – both from the defeat, but even more so from the relentless criticism he had faced from colleagues. When he and Mrs. Helms stopped for a bite to eat on their way south along I-95 near the Virginia-North Carolina line, Helms was greeted by a standing ovation among restaurant patrons who obviously appreciated – even if his fellow senators had not – the effort he had made on his constituents’ behalf.

Political consultants would sometimes encourage the Senator to downplay his pro-life position during his re-election campaigns. According to the campaign’s polling (or their instincts), they did not think the Senator’s position staunchly in favor of protecting the unborn was altogether popular as an election-year issue. (I know from my experience working in Helms’ mailroom in my early years just out of college that much of the most critical mail that came to the office was from otherwise conservative North Carolinians who wanted him to support federal funding for abortion – mainly, they would often say openly, in order to reduce the number of poor people on welfare, sometimes adding a racial description of who they felt such people were.) Helms’ stance was immovable: “If the people of North Carolina want to bring me home because I support the right to life, so be it,” he would say. The people never did.

Another illustration from the mailroom: I learned that most senators’ offices provided succinct, non-informative responses to constituent mail – responses that were often called “care and concern.” You’ve seen these from other politicians – in Washington and elsewhere. They go something like this: “I understand and share your concern regarding [topic or specific bill mentioned by the constituent]. You may be assured that I will give this matter careful consideration when it comes before the Senate, bearing in mind your views on this important matter. Many thanks for taking the time to write, and please feel free to do so again. Blah, blah, blah.”

If a constituent wrote to Helms urging him to take a position opposite from the one he had already decided upon, he would very likely send much more than a “care and concern” response. Usually it would be in the form of a longer letter outlining the reasoning behind his position, sometimes even

including a copy of a statement he made on the issue on the Senate Floor, hoping to persuade them to his viewpoint.

In fact, Helms was renowned as a man who would tell people, truthfully, where he stood on issues. Probably the most frequent refrain since his death – and quite frequent among voters during his re-election campaigns – was this: “I may not always agree with Jesse, but at least you know where he stands.” You don’t hear that about many politicians these days. What a lasting tribute it is for his 30 years of principled service to North Carolina and the nation.