



## Recalling the indispensable Senator No



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"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 was Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) offering guidance to a new staffer eager to reply to newspaper criticism leveled against his boss. The episode is recounted in the former senator's 2005 book, "Here's Where I Stand: A Memoir."

Reading that volume reminded me of what a national gem Jesse Helms is and was. For thirty years in the U.S. Senate, he delighted most conservatives and disgusted most liberals. Standing firm on his principles, he truly didn't care what the mainstream media said about him.

And plenty was said. It was *The Raleigh News & Observer* early on that, because of his vociferous opposition to prevailing liberal nostrums, dubbed him "Senator No." Jesse Helms accepted it as a compliment.

A *Washington Post* article in 1990 claimed he "may be the nation's most notorious lawmaker." *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* described him as "the leading symbol of the radical right in the U.S. Senate." *The Dayton Daily News* printed a caricature depicting the senator holding a can of spray paint in front of a swastika. The following day the newspaper tolerantly reported that its editorial board didn't consider Mr. Helms a Nazi after all and apologized.

Some folks used to sport buttons proclaiming, "Stay on the case, Jesse." The Jesse to whom they referred was Jesse Jackson.

Those of us on the right had our own Jesse and, boy, did he ever stay on the case. Mr. Helms served as point man on a multitude of issues important to conservatives: Foreign aid, a flat tax, the United Nations, federal spending, school prayer, the Panama Canal Treaty, welfare reform and national defense were only a few.

Some of the vilest vitriol was directed at him for fighting against pornography paid for by the public through the National Endowment for the Arts. The government was dishing out dollars for "art" such as a crucifix submerged in urine and a self-portrait of a man with a whip inserted in his backside.

The senator's hostility to the latter *objet d'art* antagonized more than a few gay rights activists. He already was in their crosshairs for having pushed through the Senate a bill banning federal dollars for any AIDS education material condoning or promoting homosexual sexual activities. In 1991, some of his detractors placed a giant condom over his house and put up a sign pronouncing "Helms is deadlier than a virus."

The pro-life movement never saw it that way. Jesse Helms views the taking of innocent human life through abortion as a national scandal. He led the way as Congress approved the strongest anti-abortion restrictions in our history. So effective was he in the struggle to save unborn babies that he was burned in effigy outside Planned Parenthood's New York office. In his book, the former senator writes of September 11 and links the heartbreak of that day with what still continues:

*"Yet let us not forget that every passing day in our country, more than three thousand innocent Americans are killed at the hands of so-called doctors, who rip these little ones from their mothers' wombs. For these unborn Americans, every day is September 11."*

Jesse Helms played a decisive role in Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential election. Four years earlier, the former California governor challenged incumbent President Ford for their party's nomination. Gov. Reagan lost the first three primaries and it appeared as though any future candidacy might be tarnished by an image of a losing candidate.

Then Senator Helms stepped in. The next primary was in North Carolina; Jesse pressed the governor's campaign to let Reagan be Reagan. Big money was spent on TV ads. A new 30-minute campaign tape was produced.

Ronald Reagan won North Carolina, which led to other primary and caucus victories. He lost the nomination by a handful of convention delegate votes. The closeness of the contest made him the clear favorite the next time around.

Senator Helms may for many years have been Mr. Conservative, but that didn't mean he was always Mr. Republican. He was never reluctant to oppose his own party or their presidents when he thought they were wrong. *Time Magazine* reported he held up confirmation on more nominees in the Reagan and first President Bush administrations than he did when Clinton was in the White House.

Jesse Helms didn't automatically go along to get along. An aide to President Reagan was quoted: "We had to have three strategies for anything that went to the Hill. The strategy for Republicans, the strategy for Democrats and the strategy for Helms."

His early days in the Senate must have been difficult ones. His was a minority voice in a Senate and there were many legislative setbacks. But as Andrew Jackson observed, "One man with courage makes a majority." That man with courage stayed thirty years and, eventually, had a striking impact on the United States of America.

Just as there's no new Ronald Reagan on the horizon, neither is there an heir apparent to Senator Jesse Helms. I wish there were. He's a good man who has served his country well. If you don't believe it, just look at the enemies he made.

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