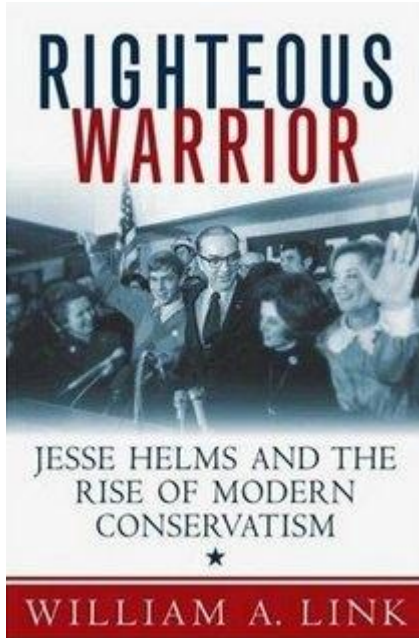


Review: Righteous Warrior

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Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism, a political biography published in February, crafts a narrative that largely reinforces popular public images of the late Jesse Helms as a demonizing figure. The author, William A. Link, is a history professor at the University of Florida who notes several times in the preface of his book that Helms represented everything he opposes. Link also says his intention was to write a fair biography of the former Senator from the Tar Heel state. While Link's biography largely fails this test, his depiction is less hostile and more respectable than many modern liberal academics may have been able to attempt. The author does include significant portions of his biography to depicting the impeccable manners, personal morality, and genteel personality that characterized Jesse Helms.

Probably the most controversial position of Jesse Helms was his opposition to the landmark federal Civil Rights legislation of 1964 and 1965 while he was a journalist and television commentator for WRAL radio and television in Raleigh, North Carolina. While not a lawmaker at the time, the controversy is further fueled because Helms never renounced his opposition to the legislation, like some Southern politicians would later do because of a genuine change of heart or perhaps for political survival. Helms always insisted he was not a racist and Link notes that Helms tried to tie his opposition to integration to larger anti-statist arguments against federal intervention. Helms kept his distance from the more radical segregationist groups who opposed integration. At the same time, he attacked the alleged communist influences in Civil Rights groups, and even the personal moral failings of its leaders. Helms felt that good people from both races could come together to solve racial problems without federal intervention. He would take further flak for opposing the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday and this [political ad](#) against quotas.

Link also discusses many commentaries written and read by Helms at WRAL about the dangers of the growing federal government. Helms declared "government could either be man's servant or master: it could not be both." Helms also attacked appeasers of communism and would soon emerge as perhaps the most notable elected anti-communist, with the exception of Ronald Reagan.

Trying to decide to run for the United States Senate, a supporter urged Helms to run by saying, "We need you Jesse in order to save the country from liberalism." In his first Senate campaign Link declares:

Repeating the familiar *Viewpoints* message, he told voters in 1972 about an expanding and intrusive federal government, the threat of socialism, the excesses of the welfare state, rising crime, deteriorating moral standards - all problems related,

he said, to an out of control liberal state. The welfare system, he explained to an audience in the eastern North Carolina tobacco town of Smithfield, was a "mess," beset by "loafers and parasites." Helms fashioned a populist appeal that was targeted toward ordinary people and toward the frustrations of white, rural, and small town North Carolinians. His message, Helms said, was directed toward "the person who pulls on his clothes in the morning and grabs his dinner pail and goes off to work."

In fact, Link notes that Helms was running as a Republican in the 1972 Senate campaign and had recently switched parties. The Republican Party offered little help or resources to Helms. Most of his supporters were Democrats, who had long dominated state politics in North Carolina during this era. Those supporters were admirably dubbed "Jessecrats." Helms would however benefit greatly from Democratic Presidential Candidate George McGovern's unpopularity in North Carolina, and a last minute campaign stop by incumbent President Richard Nixon, when it appeared Helms had a chance to win. Helms did win, and while all of his senate races were relatively close, he was always able to hold together a strong and loyal coalition of religious conservatives, white males, and rural and small town voters. Always the underdog, he played up his anti-establishment and anti-liberal crusades, and his political obituary was prematurely written on a number of occasions.

Link also traces how Jesse Helms was a master at learning the rules of the U.S. Senate and was able to sabotage or hold up liberal legislation. He was dubbed "Senator No," a title he seemed to embrace. Even if holding up legislation failed, Helms found ways for liberal senators to have their votes recorded on unpopular legislation.

Helms attacked President Gerald Ford's moderate policies, especially his support for détente. Helms effectively dramatized his conflict with Ford and Henry Kissinger by sponsoring the visit of [Alexander Solzhenitsyn](#) to the United States in 1975. Kissinger vetoed the idea of having a meeting between Ford and Solzhenitsyn because of fears the meeting could threaten United States Soviet relations and treaties. Helms continued to attack Ford relentlessly on this issue. Conservatives rallied around Helms and the issue positioned the senator as a leading voice for a hard line against communism.

Helms would gain further prominence for his support of the insurgent Ronald Reagan campaign in the 1976 Republican Presidential Primary. Reagan, who had lost a string of defeats going into the North Carolina Primary, relied on Helms' grassroots network of support for victory. Reagan's victory meant it was the first time a sitting president had been defeated in a primary of a state where he actively campaigned. Many more primary victories for Reagan would follow, although Reagan would suffer defeat at the convention.

Link spends a great deal of his account discussing Helms' fight against secularists, pro-abortion groups, homosexual activists, the media, and artists who received federal funds for obscene or anti-Christian art. Helms attacked Andres Serrano's art piece titled "[Piss Christ](#)," which received an endowment for \$15,000 at taxpayer expense. Taking on hot button conservative stances other lawmakers liked to avoid, Helms became even more of a national figure due to the growth of political correctness and Helms's seemingly antiquated positions and rhetoric. He was a favorite target of special interest liberal groups and often times embarrassed

moderate Republicans.

The author is more balanced in representing the importance of faith in the life and politics of Jesse Helms. Link offers an inspirational account of how Helms' faith touched and impacted his life during his first run for the U.S. Senate. Also included is a dramatic encounter and relationship between the rock star Bono and Helms, and Bono's role in securing support from Helms for helping victims of AIDS in Africa. Link portrays at various times how Helms attempted to reach out to black voters in North Carolina. Link spends a good deal of his account editorializing many of Helms' battles against his opponents, and offers a greater voice to Helms' detractors. What ultimately emerges from this book is another denunciation of Helms, yet slightly more sympathetic.

I suspect Helms' supporters can understand this, and embrace it to an extent. Jesse Helms often delighted and capitalized on those who opposed him. But for all his famous detractors, Helms did indeed have supporters as well, something many of his opponents could never appreciate or fully understand. I remember watching C-SPAN during his last Senate campaign in 1996 and Helms stopped off at a tobacco farming event in rural North Carolina. His supporters mobbed him as a hero and as the leading voice and champion for their frustrations, their rural Christian sympathies, and their desire to be heard. Their eyes lit up and I watched as they ran along side of him while he rode in a golf cart. It was mostly poorer rural people who were in fact marginalized in ways that were different than some of the groups that Helms opposed, but these rural people felt as if they were victims of stereotyping and negative portrayals as well, and in Jesse Helms they saw a kindred spirit.

Helms was a powerful presence in Washington, and Link does give him immense credit for being a persuasive conservative in the senate, especially as the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. In addition to his role as critic of détente, he became a hero to many Cuban Americans because of his hard line positions against Fidel Castro.

In Link's book, there is even an inspirational encounter with truck drivers who cheered Helms during an unplanned stop at a rural Hardee's fast food restaurant while driving back to North Carolina after a long, tiring, and protracted battle on Capital Hill. Helms was applauded and cheered because he had dramatically fought alone against Ronald Reagan and virtually everybody else to oppose a 9 cent increase in the federal gasoline tax.

Helms was part of Washington, yet anti-Washington, mostly preferring to spend time with his family. His Senate colleague Robert Byrd (D. WV) said, "He was willing to stand even though he might stand alone."

His colleague Orrin Hatch (R. UT) described it another way, "Many have tried to define Jesse Helms by what he opposed. I will remember him for what he supported: Freedom, human rights, and a strong and independent America, free to spread its good in the world."