

Jesse Helms Passes Baton to Next Generation

By Deborah DeMoss Fonseca

Roll Call

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Scores of people packed the memorial celebration for former Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), who passed away on July Fourth. The vice president attended. There were two planeloads carrying a bipartisan group of more than 20 current Senators. As I scanned the diverse crowd, I was impressed by the number of former staffers — some of whom worked for him decades ago — gathered at the service. This was a tribute to the fact that he was a man of unimpeachable character and integrity.

In the days since Helms' death, many of us have received correspondence and calls from leaders around the world, as well as from ordinary citizens. They have paid him remarkable tributes attesting to his international impact. They wanted to pass on their gratitude for a man who was a relentless defender of freedom around the world.

In January 1981, I walked into Helms' office seeking a six-month internship. I was a 20-year-old student at Wheaton College in Illinois, and I had come to Washington to study foreign policy at American University.

My parents had cultivated in my six siblings and me a conservative philosophy, which was already being tested in the college classroom. We had traveled much as a family, and I had a keen interest in foreign cultures, peoples and languages. I had done my research the old-fashioned way and determined that I wanted to carry out my internship with Helms. He was a conservative Christian and was on the Foreign Relations Committee.

After an interview, and my bold admission that I would work gratis, I was hired. My association with the Senator over the next 28 years left an enduring impression.

After my parents, it was perhaps Helms, more than any other living person, who helped to shape my worldview. When I started with the Senator, I had recently lost my father, and the Senator said he intended to be my "surrogate father." He took me under his wing, tutored me, mentored me and taught me to exercise the courage of my convictions. He was my boss, yet he was my friend.

Many years later, when I told the Senator that I was getting married, he insisted I bring in my fiancé for an "interview." He said he wanted to ask all the questions my father would have asked. When René flew in from Honduras to visit the Senator, they spent the better part of a day together — getting to know each other and discussing our future. That's just the kind of man Jesse Helms was. He was the real deal.

Even after I "retired," I never really left the Senator; his imprint on my life was indelible. Sen. and Mrs. Helms — who was his remarkable partner every step of the way — became the godparents to our oldest son, David. He took on the job of godfather as seriously as he did any legislative battle. He was a hero of whom our son could be proud.

When we took David to Capitol Hill, the Senator spent time with him — eating ice cream, introducing him to Senate bean soup, and educating him on U.S. history. Both the Senator and his wife remembered their godson throughout the year. On one occasion, Sen. Helms insisted on taking David and his sister Deborah — over the objections of the well-meaning Senate Doorkeepers — into the Cloakroom and onto the floor when the Senate was in session.

The Senator was a challenging boss. Yet “Senator No” had a tender heart, and was both a gentle man and a gentleman.

Helms reminded us often that he had come to Washington “not to win a popularity contest” and did not mind what the chattering classes remarked about him. He never looked at the polls and never asked which position would bolster his political standing at home. He never feared standing alone in the storm.

The political cartoons depicting him in a derogatory fashion ended up as framed artwork on his office walls. When I recounted to him one disparaging cartoon that had appeared in a foreign newspaper, he requested that I call the editor of that paper and ask for a signed copy.

The Senate institution became the place where he intended to put down his marker and work to educate the next generation. He knew that it would be of little consequence if he merely gave speeches and cast his vote. He understood that taking action is indispensable.

His mastery of the Senate rules, the force of his personality and the strength of his character enabled him to have a far-reaching impact like few others in history.

He didn't care to join the cocktail circuit. His favorite “power lunch” was dining with Mrs. Helms and his family. And his favorite “power meeting” was with his constituents. I recall well the day the Senator told me to take care of meeting with a distinguished Latin American president, because he was busy with a group of North Carolina students.

Helms' fearlessness to promulgate his convictions was contagious. The courage to remain steadfast in his principles was legendary. The most frequent comment I've heard since his passing is: They just don't make them like Jesse anymore.

When asked about his future political ambition, he once stated that he was running for nothing more than the Kingdom of Heaven. This was the essence of Jesse Helms.

It is up to each generation to step into the arena. That was the Senator's dream. He has passed the baton. His reputation and work will live on in the hearts and minds of millions around the world. It is time now for others to carry on the fundamental conservative values that were so effectively advanced by Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms.

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