

Still at the Helm

North Carolina's beloved former senator continues to fight the good fight.

by Fred Barnes

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JESSE HELMS doesn't miss Washington. After 30 years in the Senate, he retired in 2002. "I was just so glad to get home," he says. Helms and his wife Dot live in the brick house that used to belong to her father. It's minutes from the state capitol and close to his small office. It's been their Raleigh home for more than a half-century. Their daughter Jane and her family live next door. Helms drops by his office most days, watches C-SPAN occasionally, but keeps his political activity to a minimum. Looking back at his years in Washington, he says: "I hope I haven't made too many people mad."

He made many people mad. His dogged and unflinching devotion to conservatism infuriated liberal Democrats and a good many Republicans. Now he's the one who gets upset. Helms is disappointed that so few senators have rushed to defend the sanctity of traditional marriage. He hates the excessive spending passed by Congress. Having made the eradication of communism in Latin America one of his chief causes as a senator, Helms is troubled by the resurgence of the Marxist threat and America's soft response to it. "We'll never be free of our responsibility" there, he told me. Helms believes the best thing that could happen in the region is for Cuban dictator Fidel Castro to die. "I wish I didn't think that," he says. "But I'm convinced of it."

Helms, 83, and forced by a nerve disorder to use a walker, has commenced a final fling as a public figure. His memoir, *Here's Where I Stand*, was published by Random House in August. He's not going on a book tour, nor is he doing radio interviews. Helms taped a single TV interview with Sean Hannity of Fox News. And he's granted a few interviews with print journalists he knew in Washington. All this will culminate with a banquet honoring Helms in Washington on September 20.

Since he left the Senate, Helms has done two things of note in North Carolina politics. Early in 2002, he endorsed Elizabeth Dole as his Senate replacement. He did so at the National Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington. The effect was to cut off any conservative challenger to her in the Republican primary. She won easily. Last year, Helms backed Richard Burr, a U.S. House member, for the Senate seat vacated by John Edwards, who ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic presidential nomination. Burr, too, didn't face a conservative Republican opponent. Helms aided Burr's late rally to defeat Democrat Erskine Bowles by introducing him at a gathering in Smithfield shortly before Election Day.

Now, Helms devotes time to answering written questions from historians and others. A biographer of British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, whom Helms befriended when she was a mere Tory backbencher, recently sent him ten questions. They included this one: "How pleased were you by Margaret Thatcher's reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?" As you might expect, Helms was very pleased. "It was important for the Soviets to understand that their invasion would not be ignored or tolerated," he wrote. "Lady Thatcher did what was right without looking around to see who else would stand with her. She displayed the principled leadership I had seen in her when we first met."

To Judson Cox, the editor of the *North Carolina Conservative*, Helms expressed his irritation with politicians and activists who are conservative in name only. "It has become more acceptable to describe yourself as a conservative, but not everyone who uses that term about themselves is truly a conservative," he wrote. "I'm not comfortable with all the categories people want to sort themselves into to explain how they can be a conservative and support liberal ideas. Conservatism is a hard choice for a society that

has become accustomed to big government and big entitlements promoted by liberals."

Like President Bush, Helms has been strongly influenced on the issue of combating AIDS in Africa by an unlikely source, U2 singer Bono. "In 2001, I was asked if I would meet with Bono, and I agreed," Helms writes in his memoir. "I will never forget Bono's compassion . . . I had never heard of him, but my younger staff members had. They quickly educated me . . . Since that first meeting, Bono and my wife and I have become friends." Helms goes on to characterize Bono as "an enormously impressive gentleman" and "this remarkable young man."

But his meeting with Bono and later support for increased funding for fighting AIDS wasn't the end of their relationship. Helms and his wife attended two dinners hosted by Bono and then did the unimaginable (at least in Helms's case)--attending a U2 rock concert. "While I may not have been as 'into' the music . . . I was very much in sync with the band's desire to use their public platform on behalf of people in desperate need," Helms writes.

This week, Helms is to tape a special message for churches on the AIDS scourge, which he calls "a crisis that threatens to destroy entire populations in Africa." He asks, in his prepared remarks, what can Christians do? "First, resist the urge to turn away . . . Remember Jesus' words to his disciples. When you care for the least of these, you care for me."

In his reflections, Helms is both kind and tough, just as he was as a senator. He strains to be positive about his political foes. In his memoir, he calls Edwards "a personable fellow." Of Jimmy Carter, he writes that "neither of us wanted anything but good for our citizens." Of course Helms reveres Ronald Reagan and praises George W. Bush for thwarting terrorists, post-9/11, and taking up the cause of democracy around the world.

Helms saves his tough talk for the mainstream media. He chuckles at formulas worked out by political reporters that showed he couldn't possibly win a statewide election, particularly in 1984 when he faced popular Democratic governor Jim Hunt. Helms says he almost began to believe the formulas. As it turned out, he never lost an election.

"How can the major media be so wrong so often?" Helms asks in his book. "The answer is obvious. They are profoundly out of sympathy with the ideals and goals of the American people . . . The elite media--and you know who you are--are overwhelmingly produced by men and women who certainly have a smug contempt for American ideals and principles . . . The major media automatically blame America first." Helms is thrilled by the arrival of the Internet as an alternative source of news. "Anyone who really wants the facts can find them on the Internet--24 hours a day."

As publication of his memoir neared, Helms was faced with a temptation. His publisher wanted to delay publication until this fall and have its release kicked off by an interview on *60 Minutes* with Dan Rather. To this idea, Helms, his wife, and his staff all responded with a hearty no.

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