

## THE HELMS LEGACY

### Farewell to a Great Jacksonian

Liberals' bête noire helped ensure the triumph of the civil-rights revolution.

**BY WALTER RUSSELL MEAD**

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As rumors spread through Georgetown, Cambridge and Manhattan that North Carolina's Sen. Jesse Helms had decided not to run for re-election to the seat he had held since 1973, the merriment among the chattering classes could scarcely be contained. Anti-gay rights, antiabortion, anti-world government, pro-Bible and pro-tobacco, Jesse Helms is the antitype of political correctness. His enemies have never been able to beat him at the polls; now that the senator is yielding the floor to Father Time, liberal Democrats--and not a few pro-business Republicans--rejoice at the imminent departure of an eloquent, resourceful, inveterate foe.

The jubilation is both premature and misguided. It is premature because while Jesse Helms may be retiring from public life, the ideas and the values he represents are gaining, not losing, importance in American politics. It is misguided because for all his staunch conservatism and angry rhetoric, Mr. Helms is one of a handful of Southern statesmen who ensured the triumph of the civil-rights revolution.

In his generation, Jesse Helms was a leading spokesman for what I have called Jacksonian America. With its roots in the Scotch-Irish communities that settled in the colonial piedmont and opposed the wealthy merchants and planters in the opulent plantations of the coastal regions, Jacksonian populism is antigovernment, antielitist, and pro-middle class. Andrew Jackson and his ultimate political heir, James Knox Polk, both grew up in the Carolina piedmont; both were shaped by its culture of honor and populism. Jackson and Polk made their careers in Tennessee; Mr. Helms stayed in North Carolina, where small farmers, small-business men and ordinary white working people gave him their trust.

Jacksonian populism and its avatars are not the most popular members of the American body politic. Liberals deplore their nationalism, their traditional views on everything from race relations to sexual conduct to corporal and capital punishment. Business deplores the populist economic streak, which supported the Homestead Act awarding free federal land to settlers in the 19th century and today supports the mortgage-interest deduction and other middle-class entitlement programs.



Mr. Helms began his political career at a time when Jacksonian populism seemed fated to dwindle away in American politics. Most mid-20th-century intellectuals believed that the future of populism lay in the politics of labor and social democracy,

mediated through the leadership of technocrats--"experts" whose specialized knowledge in everything from educational policy to welfare to foreign relations would supersede the misguided and flawed instincts of the public at large.

But the end of the 20th century saw the renewal rather than the end of Jacksonian America. Social democracy and the labor movement lost their hold over the descendants of the European immigrants who poured into the country in the years before World War I. And with fiascos like the war on poverty and the war in Vietnam to their credit, the Harvard-educated technocrats who had hoped to reshape the nation were increasingly disdained by an aroused and assertive public opinion.

While even today Jesse Helms cannot be called a centrist figure in the American establishment--nor would he welcome such a description--there can be no doubt that over the past 30 years public opinion has moved, often dramatically, in his direction. In foreign policy, over which Mr. Helms had his greatest national impact due to his tenure as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee from 1995 to 2001, views he has long espoused that were once dismissed as crackpot have now become established U.S. foreign policy. The Kyoto Protocol, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and the proposed small arms, land mine and International Criminal Court treaties will not be ratified by the Senate anytime soon.



If Mr. Helms can be seen as one of the great conservative figures of American history, calling the nation to remain faithful to traditional values in the midst of rapid social change, he also deserves to be remembered as one of a handful of men who brought white Southern conservatives into a new era of race relations.

This was not my initial impression of Mr. Helms, when as a young boy in North Carolina during the civil rights movement I listened to his anti-integration, anti-Martin Luther King commentaries on WRAL-TV. But once the civil-rights legislation of the 1960s was enacted, Mr. Helms--along with some of his erstwhile segregationist colleagues like South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond--did something very revolutionary for Southern white populists.

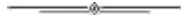
He accepted the laws and obeyed them.

This is not how Southern politicians responded in the 1870s and 1880s. Populists like South Carolina's "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman did not just fulminate against civil rights laws. They led movements of armed, organized resistance, intimidating black voters at the polls, defending racial lynchings and, in Tillman's case, being directly and openly involved in the murder of black political leaders.

Even as the passions of the civil-rights movement were at their height, Messrs. Helms and Thurmond (whose father was Ben Tillman's lawyer) shunned violence. Without ever losing their credentials as hard-core defenders of Southern values, they hired African-American staffers and gave African-Americans the same level of constituency service they gave whites. Even their opposition to affirmative action is based on their claim that these principles violate what ought to be a color-blind stance on the part of the government.

That is something no white Southern politician, and especially one representing Mr. Helms' core supporters of farmers and small-town whites, would have ever said before Jesse Helms came along. It is something they all say now.

Mr. Helms could have followed the Tillman path and led the white South into violent resistance; he also could have failed to carry his supporters with him into grudging acceptance of the new racial order. He disciplined and tamed the segregationist South even as he represented it to a hostile nation. We are all better off because he managed this difficult high-wire act.



His supporters followed Mr. Helms because they trusted him. Mr. Helms was never afraid to court national unpopularity, even ostracism, when the interests or the values of his constituency demanded it. He became a national hate object for feminists, antitobacco crusaders, the gay-rights movement, United Nations supporters, and opponents of the Cuban embargo. That hostility limited his role in American politics even as it strengthened his base. If it bothered him, he never let it show.

Like many--most--Americans, I do not agree with much of what Jesse Helms stands for. But as he prepares to step down from the Senate, I cannot help but feel that we are losing something all too rare in American politics: a man who consistently put principle before expediency, loyalty before ambition. In these qualities, we could use a lot more like him.

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