

The Jesse Helms You Should Remember

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Monday, July 7, 2008; Page A13

Washingtonpost.com

With the passing of Sen. Jesse Helms, the media have demonstrated one final time that they never fully understood the power or impact of this great man. Consider, for example, The Post's obituary of Helms; here are some things you would not learn about his life and legacy by reading it:

As chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Helms led the successful effort to bring Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic into the NATO alliance. He secured passage of bipartisan legislation to protect our men and women in uniform from the International Criminal Court. He won overwhelming approval for his legislation to support the Cuban people in their struggle against a tyrant. He won majority support in the Senate for his opposition to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. He helped secure passage of the National Missile Defense Act and stopped the Clinton administration from concluding a new anti-ballistic missile agreement in its final months in office -- paving the way for today's deployment of America's first defenses against ballistic missile attack. He helped secure passage of the Iraq Liberation Act, which expressed strong bipartisan support for regime change in Baghdad. He secured broad, bipartisan support to reorganize the State Department and bring much-needed reform to the United Nations, and he became the first legislator from any nation to address the U.N. Security Council -- a speech few in that chamber will forget.

Watching this record of achievement unfold, columnist William Safire wrote in 1997: "Jesse Helms, bete noire of knee-jerk liberals . . . is turning out to be the most effectively bipartisan chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee since Arthur Vandenberg. . . . Let us see if he gets the credit for statesmanship that he deserves from a striped-pants establishment." This weekend, we got our answer.

What his critics could not appreciate is that, by the time he left office, Jesse Helms had become a mainstream conservative. And it was not because Helms had moved toward the mainstream -- it was because the mainstream moved toward him.

When Helms arrived in Washington in 1973, conservatives were a minority not only in our nation's capital but also within the Republican Party. He often took to the floor as the lonely opposition in 99-to-1 votes. By the time he became chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in 1995, Republicans were in the majority in the Senate and conservatives were in control of the Republican Party. And Helms was winning floor votes by wide bipartisan majorities.

What made Helms stand out was his willingness to stand up for his beliefs before they were widely held -- even if it meant challenging those closest to him. In 1985, his dear friend Ronald Reagan was preparing for his first summit with Mikhail Gorbachev when a Ukrainian sailor named Miroslav Medvid twice jumped off a Soviet ship into the

Mississippi River seeking political asylum. The Soviets insisted that Medvid had accidentally fallen off -- twice. The State Department did not want an international incident on the eve of the summit. But Helms believed it was wrong to send a man back behind the Iron Curtain -- no matter the cost to superpower diplomacy. He tried to block the ship's departure by requiring the sailor to appear before the Senate Agriculture Committee, which he chaired then -- and he had the subpoena delivered to the ship's unwitting captain in a carton of North Carolina cigarettes.

Despite Helms's efforts, the ship was allowed to leave for the Soviet Union with the Ukrainian sailor aboard. Miroslav Medvid was not heard from again until 15 years later, when he came to Washington to visit the man who fought so hard for his freedom. I was working at the time on Helms's Foreign Relations Committee staff and witnessed this emotional meeting. Yes, Medvid told Helms, he had been trying to escape -- that was why he joined the Merchant Marine in the first place. When he was returned to the Soviet Union, he said, he was incarcerated in a mental hospital for the criminally insane. The KGB tried to drug him, but a sympathetic nurse injected the drugs into his mattress. Eventually he was released; today he is a parish priest in his native village in Ukraine.

In the course of dozens of interrogations, he told Helms, "the KGB didn't fulfill its desire about what they wanted to do with me. They were afraid of something," he said, "and now I know what they were afraid of." They were afraid of Jesse Helms.

President Bush had it right when he said on Friday that "from Central America to Central Europe and beyond, people remember: In the dark days when the forces of tyranny seemed on the rise, Jesse Helms took their side." This is the Jesse Helms that Miroslav Medvid remembers. Unfortunately, it was not the Jesse Helms written about this weekend.

The writer, the chief White House speechwriter, was Foreign Relations Committee spokesman for Sen. Jesse Helms from 1995 to 2001.