

'The old lion is dead'

The Fayetteville Observer

Published July 13, 2008

By: Robert Wilkie

Washington

On a very cold January night in 1919, Archie Roosevelt sent a simple, one-sentence telegram to his brothers and sisters — “The old lion is dead.” That sentiment, expressed once for Theodore Roosevelt, was precisely how I felt when I heard the news on Independence Day that Jesse Helms was gone. The old lion was dead.

For those under the age of 80, it is hard to remember a time when Jesse Helms was not part of North Carolina’s tapestry. We read his columns, listened to him on radio, watched him on television and heard him thunder from the floor of the United States Senate. No leader in the history of this state, with the exception of Andrew Jackson, had so profound an influence on us or on the course of America’s history.

No one was ever neutral about Sen. Helms and that in and of itself is a testament to what he believed politics should be — not a tussle of banalities but a battleground of passions and ideas. He often quoted Thomas Jefferson, that America must be an “Empire for Liberty.” The senator had an unabashed faith that the mission of America was to fan the flames of liberty by protecting and defending our Constitution at home and national sovereignty abroad.



Sen. Helms understood, as President Reagan did, that freedom is fragile and even in these times rare. He steadfastly refused to compromise with communism and carried on that fight against new and equally lethal enemies after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Margaret Thatcher noted that “Sen. Helms’ record as a freedom fighter is unmatched ... and his convictions were triumphantly validated in circumstances so embarrassing for his critics that they have been rewriting them ever since.”

He was our voice

No matter what was happening around the world, he always came back to the “North Carolina dinner table.” That was the place where faith, wisdom and tradition passed from generation to generation. On a trip over western North Carolina, he looked out at the landscape somewhere between Charlotte and Bryson City. It was night and all you could see was the scattered lights of small towns and farms. The senator pointed and said, “Look at that. Each light represents folks that the New York Times and The Washington Post will never care about. We have to be their voice.” And so he was. Every day he reminded us that we worked for textile workers, tobacco farmers, shopkeepers, policemen and soldiers. He never forgot that, nor did the people who sent him to Washington five times.

When you walked into his office, the first thing you noticed was an amazing series of pictures. On one side of the office were the most hateful series of editorial cartoons ranging from one depicting the senator as “The Frog That Intimidated Washington” to others showing him as a simple-minded North Carolina caveman. Most would have recoiled at the thought of such attacks. Jesse Helms reveled in them, even sending the cartoons back to the artists for autographs.

The other side of the office was different. Most politicians have glory walls filled with photos of people they have run into and barely know. They tend to be impersonal and self-gratifying. Not so with the senator. In one glance you saw Reagan, Solzhenitsyn and Thatcher; Sam Ervin, Barry Goldwater and Hubert Humphrey; his lifelong friend Billy Graham plus Gen. Jimmy Doolittle, John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Richard

Petty and yes, Bono. It took time to read the inscriptions because they were more than perfunctory signatures thrown on a page. Each contained a common thread of profound respect for one man's political courage and personal dignity that transcended party and ideological lines. Such is not the stuff invented by caricaturists or editorialists who never set foot in the arena.

It was not always easy for Sen. Helms to stand athwart the tides of big government, falling standards, and totalitarianism and yell "Stop." But as was noted at his memorial, he learned from his parents that the Lord did not expect him to win every time, the Lord only expected him to try. Try he did and for those of us fortunate to know him, we are all better for it. The old lion made us proud.

Robert Wilkie is assistant secretary of defense for Legislative Affairs. He is a Fayetteville native, the son of an Army artillery commander, and a graduate of Fayetteville city schools. He served as Sen. Helms' counsel from 1988 to 1995. He is married to the former Julia Bullard of Fayetteville.

AP file photo