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Unvanquished

Here's Where I Stand: A Memoir, Jesse Helms, Random House, 317 pages

by Joe Scotchie

For many conservatives, the publication of Jesse Helms's memoirs is a melancholy event. It reminds them of a time when there was one politician they could count on, time and time again, to take lonely stands against polite—i.e., liberal—opinion. On Capitol Hill, conservatives had no finer champion than Jesse Helms, the longtime Republican senator from North Carolina. Once he took a position on any issue, foreign or domestic, he stuck to it with a tenacity that was absolutely inspiring. There are principled conservatives in Congress today: Ron Paul and Tom Tancredo, for instance, in the House, and Tom Coburn in the Senate. But there will never be another Jesse Helms. He probably was on the losing end of more 99-1 votes than any senator in history. That distinction alone should earn him a special spot in the right-wing section of heaven.

Much of the book is comprised of reminiscences, including those of the presidents and senators with whom Helms served. There is also a warm remembrance of his Mayberry-style boyhood in Monroe, North Carolina, along with loving tributes to Dorothy Coble, his wife of over 60 years. But it is Helms on the issues that gives the book its wallop. To read such sections is to recall what an electrifying figure Helms was. Liberals could hardly believe that such a figure still existed. The “second reconstruction” of the 1950s and '60s was to have made his hell-for-leather style obsolete. Many Southern pols would move left or moderate their style. But not this upstart from North Carolina, a state once hailed as the region's most liberal, the “Wisconsin of the South.”

Helms is at his best when tackling what he dubs the “Hot Button Issues.” He recounts his bitter criticism of the National Endowment for the Arts after he discovered the dubious “artwork” of Robert Mapplethorpe and such taxpayer-funded worthies as Andres Serrano's “Piss Christ.” He revives the long-lost school prayer issue. And he gives no quarter to legalized abortion. At such moments, Helms's courage utterly shames his

enemies. What also shines through is his sincerity when confronting those issues that GOP regulars have long considered irrelevant. For instance, on NEA funding, Helms claims:

The assault on America's basic values by self-proclaimed, self-appointed "artists," who so often assaulted the moral sensibilities of the American people, is real and easily documented. I was happy to do everything in my power to end this funding.

Then on outlawing school prayer:

It is hardly coincidence that banishing the Lord from the public schools has resulted in the schools being taken over by a totally secularist philosophy. Christianity has been driven out. In its place has been enshrined a ... permissiveness in which the drug culture has flourished, as have pornography, crime, and fornication—in short, everything but disciplined learning.

Finally, on abortion, which is where Helms's eloquence reaches its peak:

I ... have been criticized for comparing the scourge of abortions with the Holocaust, but I reject such criticism because this is indeed another kind of holocaust. ... Killing unborn babies has become a tool of convenience in today's permissive society. At latest count, more than 40 million unborn children have been deliberately, intentionally destroyed. What word adequately defines the scope of such slaughter?

That no complete victories have been won on these and other cultural issues is hardly the fault of a single senator. The best Helms could achieve were partial triumphs: the NEA wasn't abolished, but under Dana Gioia's chairmanship, no dirty art has been funded and some worthy proposals have been launched. In his first term, President Bush signed a bill outlawing partial-birth abortion, and even leading Democrats now proclaim their desire to reduce the number of abortions. Thanks to mid-1980s legislation, Bible Clubs have proliferated at high schools across the country. Lack of greater victories, especially on abortion and prayer, is due to the Supreme Court's enduring liberal majority.

Concerning the civil-rights era, Helms delivers no *mea culpa* for his opposition to federal interference in Dixie's affairs. Helms was a most patriotic conservative. He also is a Southern patriot. It would have been impossible for him to support court rulings that dictated to Southerners on how their public schools should be operated. Helms recalls an earlier era when "black neighbors and white neighbors depended on each other, and the vast majority lived in harmony." What he opposed was social engineering, especially forced busing that "fostered hatred and bigotry by polarizing the very people who most needed to work together ..."

Helms revisits his opposition to the federal Martin Luther King holiday. He recites some of his reasons: King's highly critical comments on America's conduct in Vietnam and his communist allies—"these agents of overthrow" as Helms terms them. I suspect Helms

also acted out of a sense of *pietas*: in the North Carolina of his youth, the third week of January had a Robert E. Lee holiday.

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, Helms reigned as the premier outlaw figure on Capitol Hill. By the late 1990s, he was chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, a position that gave him some standing in Washington. Liberals might have been surprised to see Madeleine Albright attending an event with Helms at the Jesse Helms Center in Monroe. Some conservatives, I'm sure, were similarly uneasy. During the Clinton years, Helms opposed the invasion of Haiti but supported the war against Yugoslavia. His willingness to fight the culture wars was the chief reason conservatives loved Helms. In this book, however, more space is given to foreign affairs.

Surprisingly, Helms can sound positively globalist when formulating America's place in the world. America, he writes, should "promote the rights of women and children, including women's suffrage in those countries where women ... do not have the right to vote." He falls for the notion of America as a proposition nation. (How about just a constitutional republic?) Helms even uses Jesus' injunction "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" to defend his internationalism. One seriously doubts that such teachings should mean undermining foreign leaders through economic sanctions, even if those men run dictatorships. In the same vein, Helms makes this sweeping claim for his home state:

We are a state that welcomes the world, while at the same time wanting to preserve all that we love, all that makes North Carolina great. We are not an isolationist state. Our first settlers were immigrants, and our exports have always been welcome far beyond our borders.

Is all this true? Yes, North Carolina products have made their way to foreign markets. Throughout the past century, however, prominent North Carolina politicians have been antiwar, isolationist even. Claude Kitchin, the House Majority Leader during the administration of Woodrow Wilson, stood against America's entry into World War I. Robert Reynolds, the state's colorful senator who served from 1933 to 1945, was the only Southern Democrat to oppose consistently the similar plunge into World War II. Most recently, Walter Jones, a Republican lawmaker from eastern North Carolina, made a splash by introducing legislation to begin America's withdrawal from Iraq.

Furthermore, North Carolina politicians have not always welcomed the world to their state. In his day, Reynolds was the Senate's leading opponent of mass immigration. Sam Ervin, the great conservative Democrat, a man whom Helms counted as a dear friend, was one of the few senators to speak out against the catastrophic 1965 Immigration Act that opened the floodgates to the Third World. Ervin did so in cultural terms, mainly by defending the nation's founding Anglo-Saxon heritage in the face of such sweeping changes. Meanwhile, the indefatigable Jones has taken his own stand against the illegal-alien invasion.

To be sure, when Helms lays out the welcome mat to the world, it has much to do with foreign investment. But he also boasts of the large increase in foreign workers in his home state. Those workers include hundreds of thousands of Spanish-speaking illegal aliens, who bring their alien culture and language with them. Helms likes to joke that when he first went to Washington, he referred to himself, as compared to Sam Ervin, as the state's "liberal senator." Kidding aside, Sam Ervin probably was more conservative than Helms. Both men cherished the U.S. Constitution, but Ervin never viewed North Carolina as an immigrant state, nor did he see any need for a messianic foreign policy.

I don't like to be so critical. In my youth, I volunteered for Helms's 1984 re-election run, plastering my hometown of Asheville with Helms for Senate placards. At the same time, I enjoyed scandalizing my fellow graduate-school students with pro-Helms broadsides. And I fully agree with Sen. Bill Frist's introduction, which claims that Helms will stand out as one of the greatest leaders the U.S. Senate has ever seen. *Here's Where I Stand* is a remarkable achievement; it is as memorable as the author's long career. I should hope that every Republican member of Congress buys and reads a copy of this book. It will teach them that courage and principle can prevail. A politician can take a stand in defense of controversial positions and still win election after election, even in the face of a hostile and unrelenting media. ■

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