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## Why the World is Better for Jesse Helms

By [Walter Russell Mead](#)

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Last week's joint meeting of the foreign policy committees of the American and Mexican senates served as a reminder of the unique position that Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, holds in American foreign policy today. Cranky, unilateralist, unwilling to yield American sovereignty for the sake of international cooperation, quick to impose economic sanctions, a defender of traditional Southern values, pro-gun, pro-death penalty and anti-abortion, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman is the man American internationalists love to hate.

Presidents and secretaries of state court the powerful Senator Helms the way Harry S. Truman and Dean Acheson courted Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg in the 1940's - or curse his name the way Lyndon B. Johnson and his secretary of state, Dean Rusk, cursed Senator J. William Fulbright during the Vietnam War. Liberal internationalists hate Senator Helms for his resourceful opposition to the Kyoto Protocol, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the international criminal court and the international land mine treaty. Business internationalists hate him because of his support for unilateral American economic sanctions against Cuba and Iran, and skepticism about China.

But while hating Jesse Helms remains a parlor sport in Georgetown, Cambridge and Manhattan, a longer view of American history would demonstrate that Jesse Helms is a necessary part of the process: If he didn't exist, America would have to invent him.

"You have to have both yin and yang in American foreign policy, and Jesse Helms provides the yang," said Douglas Brinkley, a professor of history and the director of the Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans. "He respects his hard-line constituency but is willing to explore centrist possibilities. This is what makes him so important to the foreign-policy process."

Senator Helms plays two roles in American foreign policy - both profoundly unpopular and even detestable from the standpoint of most of the foreign-policy establishment, but critical to the success of American foreign policy.

First, as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Mr. Helms upholds the power and prerogatives of the legislative branch in the foreign-policy process. Most foreign-policy professionals consider Congress, at best, a necessary evil in foreign policy, but

the founding fathers thought otherwise and gave the Senate power to confirm ambassadors and ratify treaties.

These powers have frustrated presidents since George Washington worked to get the Jay Treaty with Britain through the Senate in 1794. A resentful Senate tried to humiliate President Andrew Jackson by refusing to confirm Martin Van Buren as minister to Britain in 1832. When the Senate amended the first Hay-Pauncefote agreement with Britain over the Panama Canal in 1900 so drastically that Britain rejected the revised treaty, John Hay had to sit down with Lord Pauncefote for a second round of talks to produce a second treaty.

While political scientists and foreign-policy practitioners often criticize the constitutional division of power between the executive and legislative branches for causing excessive confusion, American foreign policy benefits from checks and balances. Think of Senator Fulbright's criticism of the Vietnam War. Think of the role congressional investigations played during the Iran-contra scandal. Presidents can confuse personal political advantage with the national interest; congressional oversight - even congressional obstruction - helps keep American foreign policy on an even keel.

There is another role Mr. Helms plays that infuriates internationalists but also strengthens the country's ability to conduct an active international policy: He is the key populist, conservative skeptic of the foreign-policy establishment's pet schemes for international cooperation and intervention.

Liberal internationalists would seemingly like to forget that suspicion of the foreign-policy establishment - the pundits, fellows at policy institutes and corporate lawyers - is a powerful force in the American heartland. For the elite is usually convinced it knows better than mass public opinion what foreign policy should be. Occasionally, it is even proved right.

But American public opinion will not take foreign policy on faith. It therefore falls to Senator Helms to infuriate well-meaning internationalists by subjecting the Kyoto Protocol or the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty or other key projects of liberal internationalists to acid skepticism. In doing this, Senator Helms not only speaks for the tens of millions of Americans who don't trust the foreign-policy establishment; he also opens the door to a true national consensus behind important foreign-policy goals.

This role of broker between a skeptical public opinion and an insistent internationalist elite is one of the most important in American foreign policy. This is the role Senator Vandenberg played in the 1940's. As James Chace, the author of "Acheson: The Secretary of State Who Created the American World," explained, "Having a Republican chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee with strong former isolationist credentials was indispensable to winning support for the Truman Doctrine and, above all, for the Marshall Plan."

Henry Cabot Lodge's reservations to Woodrow Wilson's draft Treaty of Versailles were also partly an attempt to win wider support for a controversial international initiative. Unfortunately, Wilson did not understand the game as well as Truman and Acheson; had Wilson compromised with Lodge's reservations, the Versailles Treaty

would have been ratified and the United States would have joined the League of Nations.

When Senator Helms addressed the United Nations Security Council last year, he quoted Lodge. Like Lodge, Mr. Helms seems skeptical about international organizations but not flat-out opposed; the compromise in which he agreed to support the payment of America's back dues to the United Nations in exchange for reforms and a reduction in Washington's contribution was a classic example of a brokered compromise between internationalists and skeptics.

He played a broker's role again last week when he took the Foreign Relations Committee to Mexico, showing that Senate conservatives are open to a deeper relationship with a more democratic Mexico.

Professor Brinkley, who followed the debate on the United Nations, said Mr. Helms's flexibility is real, though limited. "You can't sway Helms ideologically," he said, "but you can work out a pragmatic agenda if you can meet his basic concerns."

The politics of American foreign policy has been divided on regional and cultural lines at least since the South and the West forced the War of 1812 on a sullen New England. The Senate and the White House have been squabbling over foreign policy since George Washington, stung by sharp Senate questioning over a proposed Indian treaty, decided he would never return to seek its advice and consent in person.

Some hope and others fear that Mr. Helms, now 79, will decide against running for re-election in 2002. Either Richard G. Lugar, Republican of Indiana, or Joseph R. Biden Jr., Democrat of Delaware, would be favored to succeed him as chairman, depending on which party controls the Senate. Either could make a less prickly partner for the second half of the Bush administration.

Yet the ideological, cultural and institutional interests that Mr. Helms represents are not going away, and in his absence, the administration could find itself regretting the loss of a visible conservative foreign-policy leader with the credibility and clout to deliver a solid foreign-policy consensus on the right.