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Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism

by **William Link**

(St. Martin's Press, 656 pages, \$39.95)

Early last year when his presidential bid was gearing up, one of Barack Obama's classmates from Harvard Law handed the *New York Times* a [photo](#) of the young superstar from a 1990 election-watching party. Obama is wearing jeans and a blue shirt opened down to the last button, as if he's en route to a phone booth and a battle with Lex Luthor. The buttons are undone so that Obama can reveal a T-shirt: "Harvey Gantt for U.S. Senate."

Why Harvey Gantt, the former mayor of Charlotte who was running for a Senate seat in North Carolina? Why not, say, John Kerry, who was winning his second term that night in Massachusetts? It wasn't just that Harvey Gantt was black. It was that he was running against Jesse Helms.

That year Helms had attacked Gantt for benefiting from racial preferences, for supporting racial quotas, and for being close to Jesse Jackson. Gantt fought back with millions of dollars in campaign funds, raised on swings to California and New York from liberals much like Obama. The result was the same as every time Helms faced a challenge from the left. Helms won.

There was nothing unusual about Obama's 1990 sartorial choice. To be a liberal in the ages of Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton was to oppose Jesse Helms. In *Righteous Warrior*, his authoritative, occasionally textbook-ish biography of the senator, William A. Link provides a generous helping of their insults: Helms was "the Senate's most persistent yahoo," "Senator Know-Nothing," an undisputed homophobe and a vaudeville bigot.

School busing, the Martin Luther King holiday, AIDS research, gay rights, arts funding, foreign aid -- name a liberal cause and Helms was there trying to block it. How many senators had Loudon Wainwright III songs ("Jesse Don't Like It") written about them for NPR?

THE IRONY HERE -- and Link is only the umpteenth writer to realize this -- is

that the more Helms stoked that anger, the more he won. Every dollar from an eastern seaboard or San Francisco liberal was matched by support from Helms's base.

On the night of his 1990 re-election, Helms watched Dan Rather announce his victory and crowed about it when he took the stage. There was "no joy in Mudville tonight," he said. "If the liberal politicians think I've been a thorn in their side in the past, they haven't seen anything yet."

Link portrays Helms as central to "the rise of modern conservatism." This is true, as anyone who worked on Ronald Reagan's primary campaign in 1976 could tell you. Reagan's career would have ended if Helms hadn't fired up his political machine.

But Reagan's conservatism was a reaction to the threat of Great Society statism and foreign policy weakness. Helms came to conservatism as a reaction against the liberal elite -- academics, East Coast intellectuals, Freedom Riders, and anyone else who dared to meddle with the Southern family's way of life. "Nobody thought it was terrible," Helms once said of segregation. "Not even the blacks." Who were social scientists and sanctimonious politicians to say any different?

Helms entered politics explicitly to battle these people. In 1950, months before his 29th birthday, the young journalist and political mover worked on his first statewide campaign: a primary battle between two Democrats for one of the state's Senate seats. (The Democratic primary was the election, for all intents and purposes, until the mid-1960s.) A conservative senator died and was replaced by Frank Graham, the president of the University of North Carolina, a liberal who favored a slow, gradual end to segregation.

"In Frank Graham," Link writes, "the opponents of New Deal liberalism had found a target that embodied their fears about labor relations and race; these joined with their anxieties about Communist subversion in the administration of Harry S Truman."

Helms liked Graham, but he signed on with conservative Raleigh lawyer Willis Smith and battered the incumbent with two messages. One was economic freedom: Smith railed against "all unnecessary encroachments of big government upon the lives of the people." The other was race.

Although his contemporaries quibble over how much influence Helms had on the campaign, Smith's ads included a fake endorsement from a "Colored Committee for Dr. Frank Graham" and a forged photo of Graham's wife dancing with a black man. Smith won, and Mr. Helms went to Washington with him.

ALMOST EVERYTHING HELMS needed to know about public opinion he gleaned from the Smith campaign. He saw that voters didn't like to be bossed

around by perceived "elites," and that the appeal of a man like Graham could be swamped if voters were offered a man who felt like they did about race, about Communism, about the federal government. "I would like to call the roll, somehow," he told a friend, "[and determine if there were] enough people who understand state sovereignty to have some political effect."

When Smith died in 1953, Helms returned to North Carolina and wrote a column for an investment newspaper that blistered Raleigh and stuffy local editorial boards as much as it blistered Washington. He moved onto television in 1958, making the same points, and earning more explosive success.

Helms's TV commentaries still seem oddly familiar today, and not just because Helms laid the groundwork for his Senate crusades against honoring Martin Luther King ("a communist agitator") and condemning homosexuality (Bayard Rustin, co-organizer of the March on Washington, was a "sex pervert"). Helms's tenor and focus were the mold for future rightwing populists like Bill O'Reilly and Lou Dobbs.

Helms railed against the University of North Carolina for allowing liberal agitators to speak on campus, and he exhorted his listeners to support a speaker ban in the state legislature. It passed. Helms turned a teaching assistant who assigned students a slightly salacious poem into a minor Ward Churchill figure.

When the *Charlotte Observer* or the *Raleigh News and Observer* attacked Helms, he informed his fans that these newspapers had contempt for their values. "These long hairs keep talking about a revolution," Helms said privately in 1970. "One of these days they may get one -- but not the kind they expect."

Obviously, Helms was right. This was what infuriated the left about Helms: Such a reactionary could only succeed because... well, could the reaction against their *ideas* possibly be so strong? It could. But this chemistry worked against Helms, too. His politics were completely reactive. As much power as he accrued in the Senate, even his base knew that they were electing a saboteur, not a senator.

In 1984, when Helms defeated Democratic Gov. Jim Hunt in a Homeric epic of a Senate race, Helms's pollsters asked one last question, just for fun. If Helms ran for governor, would he have beaten Hunt? Helms lost the fictional race by double digits.

THIS DIDN'T SEEM to bother Helms. He realized his role in the buildup of the conservative movement, and again and again in this narrative he is shoved aside by the people he helped elect.

After getting Ronald Reagan to the threshold of the GOP nomination 1976, Helms watched bitterly as Reagan selected moderate Pennsylvania Sen. Richard Schweiker as a running mate in a craven grab for delegates. Helms fought the

Martin Luther King holiday in the Senate confident (and correct) that most conservatives didn't want it, but Link quotes a rival senator's aid on why the party abandoned him: they "wanted something to do for black recognition, and this [was] a relatively easy one." The man who the new conservative majority identified with the most was, most often, a fall guy.

Helms did have major successes on the sort of hot-wire social legislation that no other senator would touch. No one wanted to debate the National Endowment for the Arts, for example, but once Helms introduced an amendment prohibiting it from funding obscene art, few senators dared vote against it.

But the rest of his victories were short-lived. Helms terrified the foreign policy establishment when in 1986 he won the party's ranking slot on the Foreign Relations committee. He defeated a more moderate Republican for the job, and he walked out of the party's vote smiling at the press corps. "I'm sorry to disappoint you folks," he said to reporters. "I hate to ruin your day, but you lost."

From 1995 to 2001, when he led the committee, he put fear in the bones of internationalists, killed the nominations of people who favored Third World birth control, and delighted the right. But the man he defeated for the job, Indiana Sen. Richard Lugar, came back to run the committee after Helms retired. That's the same Lugar who co-sponsored [arms control legislation](#) with Barack Obama, and whom Obama says might have a place in his cabinet.

Flick on talk radio and you'll hear Helms's legacy. Flick on C-Span and you'll wonder if the man had any impact at all.

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