

www.chicagotribune.com/features/booksmags/chi-righteousbw08mar08,1,2605703.story

chicagotribune.com

A life of 'Senator No'

Biography of North Carolina's Jesse Helms may be a bit too kind to its subject

By Eric Arnesen

March 8, 2008

Righteous Warrior: [Jesse Helms](#) and the Rise of Modern Conservatism

By William A. Link

St. Martin's, 643 pages, \$39.95

The modern conservative movement owes much to the political innovations, persistence and crusades of former five-term Republican U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms of [North Carolina](#). First elected to the Senate in 1972, Helms staked out a position on the far right that allowed him to demonize his liberal opponents and promote a deeply conservative agenda. For more than a quarter of a century, he assumed the role of an ideologue who eschewed pragmatism and denounced compromise. His limited legislative accomplishments were vastly outweighed by his role in advancing an anti-government ideology, unquestioned American nationalism, strict social conservatism and the new grass-roots right.

In "Righteous Warrior," William A. Link, a historian at the [University of Florida](#) and author of numerous books on the South, has produced a judicious and comprehensive biography of Helms, a man who "left a permanent stamp on late-twentieth-century American public life." Link shares few if any of Helms' political sensibilities. "I disagreed with him profoundly," he says at the outset. Helms "represented everything that I dislike in modern politics, his policies represented polar opposites of everything I believed in." "Righteous Warrior" is a balanced, respectful (if overly detailed) study in which Link largely holds his politics in check. In fact, the book is, if anything, overly kind to its subject.

Born in Monroe, N.C., in 1921, Helms grew up imbibing small-town conservative values of "self-reliance, discipline, and hard work" and developing a deeply held Baptist faith. In young adulthood he allied himself with conservative Democrats who opposed the emerging civil rights movement. As executive director of the North Carolina Bankers Association in the 1950s, he preached against communism, liberalism and racial integration. Turning to broadcast journalism at conservative TV station WRAL in the 1960s, Helms was able to take his message to as many as a million households in his state. Along with many Southern whites unhappy with the civil rights revolution, Helms abandoned the Democrats and pursued his conservative crusade under the banner of the Republicans. "Helms saw the coming conservative backlash as the backbone of the new anti-liberal revolution," Link writes, and rode that resentment to a Senate victory in 1972.

Over the next three decades, Helms doggedly promoted his agenda in the international and domestic

arenas. An advocate of unilateral American power and an "aggressively nationalist" foreign policy, he exhibited "unwavering and unequivocal support for waging the Cold War" against the Soviet Union and its allies. Toward that end he relentlessly denounced detente and arms control with the Soviets, viewing America's communist enemy as a barbarian force over which the U.S. should maintain unquestioned military superiority. Rejecting collective security agreements, he opposed treaties that would in any way restrict America's "freedom of action." His conviction that the Soviets were up to no good in the developing world led him to embrace and even champion authoritarian regimes with abysmal human-rights records in Latin America and Africa.

Early in his public career Helms seized upon the social issues that would become fuel for the new right's explosive growth. During the 1960s he denounced universities as hotbeds of radicalism, "loose morals" and social disorder. As a senator he opposed the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion rights, mocked feminism, fought funding for AIDS research and excoriated gays and lesbians with "bitter and often even hateful language." When he took on the National Endowment for the Arts in the 1980s for its funding of what he viewed as obscene art, Helms solidified his reputation as "the Senate's most persistent yahoo," in critic Tom Wicker's words, who "represented a backward, anti-artistic and anti-intellectual sensibility that seemed to be sweeping the nation." Helms had the last laugh, however, as his championing of wholesome decency over "obscene" art allowed him to frame the debate and emerge the victor in this battle in the "brewing cultural war."

And then there was race. Like many Southern whites, Helms believed deeply in the Jim Crow system that sanctioned segregation and disfranchisement. During the 1950s he opposed the seating of black worshipers at the First Baptist Church in Raleigh, where he was a deacon and usher. His reservation about massive white resistance to civil rights was tactical, not moral. "White terror, in the age of modern media, was simply bad public relations," he believed. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 were "blows to states' rights" and "terrible mistakes" that demonstrated how "an unwieldy liberal government had run amok."

Indeed, federal intervention on behalf of black civil rights was "exactly in tune" with [Karl Marx's](#) predictions," he insisted, for "government-required integration amounted to socialism." His region's race problem was not the result of oppression but the creation of outside agitators -- "meddlers and extremists." "The racial unrest of the 1950s and 1960s, he believed, was "providing a 'spawning ground for Communism.'" To the extent that black Americans suffered disadvantage, it was a result not of discrimination but their own "deficiencies in family structure and personal responsibility." He forcefully opposed making [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)'s birthday a national holiday and staunchly defended the apartheid regime in South Africa and the white supremacists in Rhodesia. In his various campaigns for re-election, he handily played the race card, stirring up whites' fears of black political power and overtly exploiting their racial anxieties over school busing and affirmative action.

Yet Helms claimed to be "utterly confounded" and even "offended" that "anyone would consider him racist." He was anything but, he insisted, citing his friendship with black security officers and custodians in the Senate. Link rejects Helms' disclaimers, concluding that his public image as a "throwback to a long-past South" on racial issues was accurate. More than "any politician of the 1980s," he writes, "Helms was willing to exploit race for advantage." But Link leaves Helms' response to his opponents unchallenged. Was Helms really "mystified" by his anti-black reputation, or offended by charges of racism? If he was, then he was not merely "self-indulgent about race," as Link claims, but genuinely out of touch with reality, or even delusional.

Legislative victories largely eluded Helms, who remained more intent on staking out firm conservative positions, garnering publicity for himself and his causes, and expanding his right-wing national constituency. Even -- or perhaps especially -- in failure he furthered his goals. Appearing "ineffective, even hapless, he became a courageous, appealing spokesman to his supporters." For decades he was an "ideological conservative among Senate Republicans," a "minority within a minority." A master of Senate rules, he was one of that institution's "most able tacticians," frequently resorting to the filibuster to drive home his point. Democratic and Republican presidents felt his sting, as Helms blocked

ambassadorial, judicial and departmental appointments regardless of political party if nominees did not measure up to his ideological standards. For his forthright and consistent obstructionism, Helms earned the nickname "Senator No," an appellation he proudly accepted.

On a personal level, the teetotaling, chain-smoking, workaholic family man who "liked nothing better than speaking to visiting schoolchildren" or assisting tourists was, in many respects, the "complete opposite" of his public image." Determined not to underestimate or dismiss Helms, Link assiduously avoids the "ideologically charged caricatures of the right and left" and instead portrays him as a sophisticated, "media-savvy" communicator. Helms' command of language, facility with "rhetorical combat" and innovative campaign machine allowed him to "create a competing, conservative narrative" that effectively assailed the "liberal dragons" in Congress, the press and universities.

If he wasn't a "cardboard cutout," neither was Helms a deep thinker or complicated figure given to reflection or growth. Unlike many conservative white politicians, he neither updated his racial views nor disavowed his earlier anti-civil rights stances. He dismissed as insignificant perestroika and glasnost before the collapse of the Soviet Union and never reassessed his support of brutal, anti-communist dictatorships. His one and perhaps only moment of political growth, apparently, came as a result of an unlikely friendship with U2's Bono, who convinced Helms to support AIDS funding for Africa in the late 1990s. Otherwise, with Helms, what you saw was what you got: a committed ideologue who was impervious to new developments or the winds of political or cultural change.

In a 1981 cover story on Helms, Time magazine described him as a "saint to his fans" and "a dangerous buffoon to his foes." Link reveals Helms to be neither saint nor buffoon but rather a powerful and influential political force who contributed significantly to the reconfiguring of modern conservatism.

Eric Arnesen teaches history at the [University of Illinois at Chicago](http://www.uiowa.edu/) and is a frequent contributor to the Books section.

Copyright © 2008, [Chicago Tribune](http://www.chicagotribune.com/)