



Book review: Don't underestimate the power of Helms

By **Bob Ashley** : The Herald-Sun

bashley@heraldsun.com

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In the early 1970s, fresh out of college and working in Raleigh, I'd watch Jesse Helms deliver his editorials on WRAL TV every evening and cringe.

We were poles apart politically, and his style night after night was grating (as, I suspect, he intended it to be for folks like me).

So when he ran for the U.S. Senate in 1972, many of us actually entertained this thought: Let's hope he wins, because then he'll be off the air.

And, of course, he'd be such a lightweight senator he'd be out after one term.

I was far from the only person, and far from the last, to seriously underestimate Jesse Helms.

The recurrent ability of Helms to outflank, to out-politic and to stun his adversaries is a major theme of William Link's new biography of the former senator, "Righteous Warrior."

For anyone even mildly interested in North Carolina's politics and evolving ideological tilt of the past half century, the book will be rewarding, if sometimes daunting. Link is a tireless and meticulous researcher -- he says he read every one of the transcripts of Helms' 2,732 "Viewpoints" editorials delivered on air between November 1960, when he joined WRAL as an executive vice president, and February 1972. Link pored through newspaper accounts and congressional records, and interviewed countless politicians and journalists, among them The News and Observer's Rob Christensen, whose own book on North Carolina politics is being published this spring by the University of North Carolina Press.

All the familiar themes are there, deftly sketched and laced with detail.

There is, for example, the contradiction between the aggressive, take-no-prisoners public Helms and the softer, gentler Jesse seen by friends and family and staff members who served him with long hours and long tenures -- despite what Link says were some of the lowest salaries on Capitol Hill.

Helms was a lifelong racist, a charge that was inescapable but which, Link points out, often left Helms puzzled. He opposed integration of his church (and eventually left over the issue), essentially blamed three civil rights workers murdered in Philadelphia, Miss., in 1962 for their own deaths, opposed countless civil rights bills and mastered racial politics as an electoral weapon.

His appeal to the fears of eastern North Carolina whites in his 1990 victory over former Charlotte Mayor Harvey Gantt is legendary. Link writes that longtime Helms campaign operative Carter Wrenn "believed that Gantt mounted the best

campaign of any opponent. But in the end, race trumped everything else. 'Don't let anybody kid you,' said Wrenn. 'The definitive issue of that campaign was race, from start to finish.' "

And then there was the underestimation. Many saw him as a one-term senator, but he easily fended off John Ingram's disorganized campaign to win a second term, and went on to come seemingly from behind to defeat popular Governor Jim Hunt and later Gantt -- twice.

Many journalists, political observers and Senate colleagues, seeing Helms on the losing end of lopsided votes on causes he championed, read that as a sign of weakness and impending defeat.

Not so, concludes Link.

"For Helms, a legislative victory was less important than preparing for the future," he wrote. "While enraging his liberal opponents, he solidified his standing with his conservative base."

Helms' years of forceful advocacy of conservative causes over the eastern North Carolina airwaves had positioned him well to take on the role of a leader in the emerging conservative majority of the late 1970s and 1980s. His unwavering commitment to his conservative principles, his feisty style, his mastery of the media of the day and his background endeared him to and inspired conservatives.

In his later years in the Senate, Helms turned his attention from domestic to foreign issues, chairing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He never had much patience for the details of governing, but his committee chairmanship gave him a stage to promote what Link calls his vigorous nationalism and advocacy of military might.

If there is a flaw in Link's work, it is one of excess. At times, the reader claws through detail after detail of farm program debates, filibuster attempts, procedural warfare in the halls of the Senate.

(And those protective of Durham's identity will cringe at his reference to "the National Humanities Center in Research Triangle, NC".)

But the journey is worth it, for a nuanced, at times admiring and at times aghast portrait of a small-town North Carolinian whose early career as a commentator and Raleigh City Councilman propelled him to a 30-year Senate career. Along the way, he became a "righteous warrior" for and defining leader of the conservative movement.

"Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism"

By William A. Link

St. Martin's Press, \$35

Author appearance

William A. Link will discuss and sign copies of "Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism"

at 3 p.m. Saturday at The Regulator Bookshop, 720 Ninth St., Durham. For information, call 286-2700.

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