

[FindArticles](#) > [National Review](#) > [Feb 25, 2008](#) > [Article](#) > [Print friendly](#)

Freedom fighter

John Hood

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism, by William A. Link (St. Martin's, 643 pp., \$39.95)

WHY does Jesse Helms matter? To North Carolinians, who elected Helms five times to the U.S. Senate and made him the state's most successful modern politician, that question makes no sense. Before his first Senate victory in 1972, Helms was a well-known television editorialist, news reporter, and local politician in the state capital of Raleigh. Helms was a constant presence on North Carolina's airwaves from the 1950s until he left the Senate in 2003. Tar Heels loved him or hated him, but rarely ignored him.

Outside the state, the precise nature of Helms's political significance is harder to pin down. Some point to the fact that his political organization pioneered modern campaign tactics such as direct mail and sharp-edged advertising. Others see Helms as a national leader in the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, or a convenient foil for liberal activists, or a throwback to the days of segregation, or an accomplished master of the filibuster and parliamentary procedure in the Senate.

I think you can get a clearer picture of what made Helms unique--and how he came to be respected by millions both inside and outside his home state, often to their surprise--by considering the story of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's visit to the United States in 1975. Solzhenitsyn was a hero to Helms. After just one year of service in the Senate, Helms introduced a resolution to make Solzhenitsyn an honorary American citizen. It failed in the House. Then Helms helped to arrange a Washington visit for the exiled Soviet dissident the following year. At every turn, he faced obstruction by key figures in the Ford administration, led by secretary of state Henry Kissinger. When, thanks to the diligent work of Helms's staff, Solzhenitsyn was indeed brought to the country, Helms tried to set up a meeting for him with President Ford.

Not only was he rebuffed, but the State Department even forbade its employees to attend Solzhenitsyn's major speech (to the AFL-CIO). So what did the freshman senator from North Carolina do? He went to the floor of the Senate, called it a "sad day for our country," and accused Ford of "cowering timidity for fear of offending Communists." It was a public-relations disaster for the White House. Among the conservatives angered by the administration's parade of limp-noodle lickspittles was Ronald Reagan, who lambasted Ford in his newspaper column. Trying to rectify the situation, the White House approached Helms about a meeting with Solzhenitsyn, but refused to issue a written invitation for fear of supplying tangible evidence of caving in. Lacking such an invitation, Solzhenitsyn refused.

The Solzhenitsyn episode and many other compelling stories are related with competence, if not eloquence, in Righteous Warrior, a lengthy new biography of Helms by William A. Link. The author, a longtime university professor in North Carolina and now a historian at the University of Florida, is a standard-issue academic with the usual political allegiances (he's a member of Historians for Obama, among other leading ideological indicators). But, as has become standard practice in the overwhelmingly liberal field of political biography, Link begins Righteous Warrior with the promise to look beyond the conservative's public persona and the author's own politics to "judge [Helms] on his own terms." While sometimes such endeavors lead to real insights into key conservative political figures, they more often devolve into something like this: "His policies were disastrous, his principles were odious, and his political career lurched back and forth between fecklessness and villainy --but in private life he never, ever kicked his dog."

Indeed, Helms never kicked his dog. As Link dutifully reports, Helms was considered by congressional staffers to be among the nicest senators. He was known for his personal courtesy and wry wit. "Helms was especially kind to children," Link writes: Helms and his

wife adopted a boy with cerebral palsy after reading a newspaper article about how difficult it was to place such children. Later in life, he befriended the rock star Bono and even famously attended a U2 concert in 2001. It was the "loudest thing I ever heard," Helms later said, admitting that "I couldn't really understand what he was saying." (How cute it was that the senator thought the lyrics mattered.)

Establishing that Helms was, indeed, a human being, Link and many of his sources then proceed throughout much of the book to wonder how in the world one could possibly square Helms the man with Helms the public figure. How can someone perform acts of personal kindness toward needy children, foreign dissidents, unknown constituents, and Washington tourists and yet oppose government welfare programs? How can someone espouse the cause of freedom and yet criticize the civil-rights movement?

Ultimately, Link fails to resolve his dilemma because he never seriously explores his subject's ideas--which, in any biography of an ideological figure, is hard to fathom. To those who understand the philosophy of limited government, it isn't at all puzzling that a conservative politician who is generous with his own time and money could simultaneously oppose coercive measures to redistribute income through a centralized, impersonal welfare state. Link portrays Helms's opposition to civil-rights legislation, forced busing, taxpayer funding of obscenity, and Communist dictators as more political posture or campaign code than substantive argument or constitutional principle. For example, when in 1960 Helms criticized the sit-in movement that began at a lunch counter in Greensboro, he based his argument on a defense of the property rights of restaurant owners to choose whom they wished to serve. Link writes that in editorializing this way Helms "fundamentally misunderstood" what the civil-rights protesters were trying to accomplish, but his discussion makes it quite clear that Link fundamentally misunderstands the argument Helms was employing. Rather than simply being a coded message to racists, the property-rights argument sounded sensible to millions of Americans outside the South, including future presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, hardly a crypto-segregationist. Link seems to think Helms was critiquing civil disobedience, including trespass, as a means of effecting social change. In reality, Helms was challenging one of the legislative ends of the movement--laws prohibiting individuals from exercising authority over the use of their private residential or commercial property.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

If he had taken conservative ideas about rights and freedom more seriously, Link might well have offered a more thoughtful and effective criticism of Helms's role in the civil-rights debate: that by mixing a defense of property rights with less-savory references to "Negro agitators," out-of-state provocateurs, and Martin Luther King's subversive friends, Helms and other Southern commentators ended up weakening the very limited-government principles they espoused, with unfortunate and lasting consequences for American liberty. To make a truly persuasive libertarian case against federal regulation of private business decisions, it would have been necessary to marry every criticism of government overreaching with calls for the South's social and moral transformation and clear denunciations of racist business owners. Given that the segregation syndrome was largely the work of decades of intrusive laws and electoral abuses by state and local governments, there was at least a plausible conservative case to be made not just for federal intervention, but also for anti-discrimination laws to dismantle white supremacy and remedy the social and economic consequences of past state coercion.

Like many of his generation, Helms failed the test of the civil-rights era. Yet that doesn't invalidate his subsequent defense of liberty and opposition to statism, both at home and abroad. Rather than delve into these ideas in detail and disentangle the complexities, Link chooses to become a mind-reader: Dozens of times throughout the text, he asserts what Helms "must" have been thinking or planning, rather than letting the senator's voluminous writings and public statements speak for themselves. Furthermore, Link almost always seeks to interpret the controversial events of Helms's life in ways that put his subject in the worst possible light. This leads Link into some fairly obvious traps, such as pretending that North Carolina's infamous Soul City project was anything other than the scandalously wasteful boondoggle Helms always said it was, and treating the comments of estranged political consultant Carter Wrenn as authoritative when they seem to discredit Helms but not when they exonerate him.

Despite these flaws, those unfamiliar with the fascinating career of Jesse Helms could do a lot worse than read *Righteous Warrior*. The campaign sections are based largely on contemporaneous media accounts and offer a pretty good taste of what these political food fights were like. But the book must be read skeptically. It's worth remembering that, on the issues Helms got wrong, he had no lasting effect on American public policy. But on the issues he got right--the Cold War, excessive government, personal responsibility, the benefits of expanding capitalism at home and abroad, and the need to reform entitlements and the tax code--Helms, caricatured as a political dinosaur, was ahead of his time, and often successful. He helped chart the course that America must follow if it is to preserve its liberty and its exceptional place in the history of nations.

Mr. Hood is president of the John Locke Foundation, a public-policy think tank in North Carolina.

COPYRIGHT 2008 National Review, Inc.

COPYRIGHT 2008 Gale, Cengage Learning