53-34876_ch01.1-625.qxd 17.09.2007 8:56 PM Page 1

INTRODUCTION

In September 2005, nearly three years after retiring from thirty years in the United States Senate, Jesse Helms published his memoir, *Here's Where I Stand*. Helms had served as an iconic figure in American life, first as a North Carolina television editorialist and then as the most assertive spokesman for modern American conservatism in the Senate. Like many other conservatives, he opposed big government, believing that the expansion of federal controls presaged a creeping socialism. Helms favored reversing the accelerating growth of government that began during the New Deal and continued in the post–World War II era. Jesse's conservatism encompassed other issues. An outspoken opponent of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and efforts to end Jim Crow segregation through federal intervention, Helms spoke for millions of southern whites who resented the rapid changes of the 1950s and 1960s. Helms's conservatism was defined in reaction to the tumultuous 1960s: he resisted the sexual revolution, opposed feminism and the Equal Rights Amendment, and championed old-fashioned morality against the American counterculture. Opposing the secularization of public life, Helms embraced the reassertion of traditional Judeo-Christian values as a central feature of his brand of conservatism. During the 1960s, his viewing audience as a television editorialist extended no further than eastern North Carolina, but, after his election to the U.S. Senate in 1972, he attracted a large, national constituency.

Helms's political message had a powerful resonance among Americans.

53-34876_ch01.1-625.qxd 17.09.2007 8:56 PM Page 2

Unquestionably polarizing, Helms struck hard against his enemies, using cleverly constructed language. Over the years, his enemies remained the same: the liberal press, academics, homosexuals, blacks and minorities, organized labor, and urban cultural elites. Right and left along the political spectrum, Helms became a symbol. Both sides used him to define their position and message, but both sides have also demonized each other through him.

LEAVING THE SENATE in December 2002, Helms steadily declined physically and mentally, and his memoirs were finished only with considerable assistance from the Jesse Helms Center. By the time the book appeared in September 2005, Helms had deteriorated to the point that he had ended nearly all public appearances and, with few exceptions, no longer granted interviews. He was barely active in Republican Elizabeth Dole's senatorial campaign of 2002 and Republican Richard Burr's campaign two years later; in a few campaign commercials that were broadcast in 2002 and in limited appearances in 2004 he remained seated and seemed frail. On September 10, 2005, Helms attended a Raleigh bookstore event to promote his memoirs, and he appeared confused and befuddled. Ten days later, Helms attended a gala dinner in Arlington, Virginia, where five hundred people gathered to celebrate his book's publication and to hear tributes to Helms from Senator Elizabeth Dole and a videotaped message from President George W. Bush. These were, however, his last public appearances: already problems with memory and vascular dementia had overcome his usually forceful personality, and he was not recognizing old associates. In the fall of 2005, when two conservative journalists, Fred Barnes of *The Weekly Standard* and Sean Hannity of Fox News, visited Raleigh to do interviews to promote the memoirs, they found him in bad shape. Barnes ran a fluffy story, but Hannity chose not to air the televised interview. By the spring of 2006, Helms had deteriorated to the point that he entered a Raleigh convalescent home.[1]

The reaction to Helms's memoirs in 2005 suggested that the powerful ideological polarization that he inspired remained an important part of his legacy. Only a few observers confronted the truth about *Here's Where I Stand*: that, even in the self-serving genre of memoirs, it contained little substantial information about his experiences and only faintly represented the rich and detailed content of Helms's life. Even Jesse's former associates privately acknowledged that the book did not reflect Helms's authorial voice. Most of the press however, ignored the book and focused instead on Helms's legacy. Conservatives greeted its appearance. R. Emmett Tyrrell,

53-34876_ch01.1-625.qxd 17.09.2007 8:56 PM Page 3

Jr., wrote in *The American Spectator* that Helms was a figure who had "braved liberals' indignation to create the politics that now prevails on Capitol Hill and in the White House, namely, modern American conservatism." Liberals, predicted Tyrrell, would not like *Here's Where I Stand,* and they would, in "another grotesque image of the conservative public figure," try to portray him as a "bigoted, small-minded, not very intelligent, provincial" person. Helms would be interred in the special burial place that liberals reserved for leading conservatives, Tyrrell predicted.[2]

Months before the book appeared, in June 2005, the *Raleigh News and Observer,* long Helms's most consistent critic, obtained advance proofs of the book. Rob Christensen, longtime political reporter for the *N&O*, wrote a story emphasizing Helms's unchanged views on race. Unlike most southern segregationist politicians, said Christensen, Helms had never recanted his views on the civil rights movement or admitted that segregation was wrong.[3] The reviews of *Here's Where I Stand,* appearing in the fall of 2005, followed Christensen's lead. Barry Yeoman of *The Independent*, a progressive-liberal tabloid with a loyal following in the Raleigh–Durham–Chapel Hill area, denounced Helms's memoirs as a "curious exercise in political whitewash" that offered "no introspection, no sense of fallibility—not even the basic elements of good storytelling." Helms had become a "lover of all humanity" in this retelling "of Helms' own words, or perhaps those of a second-rate ghostwriter."[4] Historian Tim Tyson, reviewing the book in the *N&O*, described *Here's Where I Stand* as an "uncompromising plate of North Carolina barbecue, served up hot with red pepper vinegar" but delivering a "broth so thin" that it was, quoting Illinois senator Paul Douglas, "like soup made of the shadow of a crow which had starved to death." Where Helms claimed that he had been misunderstood on race and segregation, Tyson asserted that the former senator had embraced a "segregationist backlash" as "his ticket to the top." Jesse would be remembered, said Tyson, as "one of the most able and relentless adversaries of the South's homegrown freedom movement." But Tyson's review, by far the most biting denunciation of Helms's legacy, became subsumed when the *N&O* editors decided, presumably in the interest of "balance," to run it next to Tyrrell's laudatory piece.[5]

In 1994, one of Helms's Senate colleagues, Bill Bradley, gave Jesse a copy of Bradley's recently published memoir, *Time Present, Time Past.* Bradley was elected to the Senate from New Jersey in 1978, and, although the two men spent more than fifteen years together in the clubby, highly

53-34876_ch01.1-625.qxd 17.09.2007 8:56 PM Page 4

personalized environment of the Senate, Bradley and Helms occupied opposite ends of the political spectrum. Although Jesse was always courtly and courteous to him in personal encounters, the New Jersey senator objected to Helms's raw political style, his willingness to "take the scabs off" in order to accomplish his political objectives. Helms's conservative positions, Bradley recalled, represented the "personification of everything that I didn't believe in." Not long after he gave Helms a copy of the book, he heard from him by telephone. Helms thanked Bradley, politely suggesting that he enjoyed the book even while he disagreed with it politically. But Helms then went on to ask a favor. Jennifer Knox, his granddaughter, a basketball fan, would be visiting Washington, Jesse said, and he wondered if Bradley, a former Princeton and New York Knicks basketball star, would be willing to meet her. Bradley agreed, but suggested that they meet on a blacktop basketball court in Washington. Arriving with Jennifer in a "ridiculously old car," Jesse and Dot, his wife of five decades, watched as Bradley and Jennifer shot baskets, and he immediately realized that she was "a player." Bradley took a larger message from the encounter, as he watched two proud grandparents "beaming" on the sidelines. This was a "big lesson for me," said Bradley: after that experience, he recalled, he found it difficult to regard Helms as "the personification of evil." Rather, he saw him as a grandfather, a person, something other than a "cardboard cutout."[6]

This book represents an attempt to see Helms as something more than a "cardboard cutout." Perhaps because of the tendency to view Helms in ideological terms, he has been widely underestimated, misunderstood, and even ignored by journalists and historians. During his career and after, there has been a tendency to dismiss him as an ineffective right-wing crank. In a gross misunderstanding, many of his opponents have ignored his facility with language and clever argumentation—though they have done so at their peril. I hope to avoid the ideologically charged caricatures of the right and left, and instead to understand and assess the impact of Helms during the last third of the twentieth century. As such, this biography enjoys the approval of neither side of the polarized political environment. Many of my colleagues are astounded that anyone could abide writing such a book. On the other hand, this book has been written without the approval of Helms and his supporters; as mentioned, about the time that I started work on it in earnest, his dementia prevented him from granting any interviews, nor have I have ever met Helms. This work is not, in any sense, an authorized biography. The Jesse Helms Center, which houses Helms's papers, has been exceptionally gracious in making materials available to me, but I cannot say

53-34876_ch01.1-625.qxd 17.09.2007 8:56 PM Page 5

that they will agree with my emphases or interpretations of the senator's life. I have gotten to know him well, nonetheless, through the millions of sentences that he wrote in editorials, speeches, and correspondence; I have also met him, in a sense, through numerous interviews with his contemporaries, both opponents and supporters.

THERE ARE FEW figures more important than Jesse Helms in the emergence of the American right in recent years, more forceful in articulating a conservative agenda and ideology, more effective in fashioning a message with wide popular appeal, and more successful in implementing a political strategy to gain power. Despite the outpouring of work by recent historians about modern conservatism, remarkably little attention has been paid to Helms. Ernest Furgurson's biography of Helms, *Hard Right: The Rise of Jesse Helms*, appeared in 1986, midway through Helms's Senate career. Furgurson's study has remained the standard account.[7] Recent scholars of modern conservatism have raised a number of important questions. While some have emphasized the central role of racial politics in modern conservatism, others have stressed the potency of anti-Communist and anti-statist ideology. Still others have stressed that the emergence of conservatism as a national movement was less important than developments at the local level. This study makes a slightly different case. Even while the grass roots are crucial in understanding the emergence of modern conservatism, its emergence cannot be properly understood without comprehending developments at the national level: conservatism was a well-coordinated movement that looked to national organizations. The leaders of modern conservatism, such as Helms, helped to forge a national constituency, to communicate with it effectively, and to mobilize it politically. Suggesting that individuals do matter, I argue that Helms was a central figure in modern conservatism. I further argue that the rise of the new American right cannot be properly understood without coming to terms with Helms's role.

Between 1950 and 2002, Helms had many careers, all of them significant, as radio broadcaster, congressional aide, banking lobbyist, television broadcaster, and United States senator. From the 1950s on, Helms waged a righteous war that sought to upend the political status quo in America. In all of these careers, he was consumed by an ambition to reverse a liberal consensus that, he believed, dominated government, the media, academic life, and public affairs generally after World War II. Helms advocated an attitudinal revolution that would seal the doom of liberalism. During the 1950s and 1960s, he became a conservative ideologue, opposing the further

53-34876_ch01.1-625.qxd 17.09.2007 8:56 PM Page 6

expansion of federal power, supporting a reversal of New Deal policies in labor, agriculture, and social welfare, and criticizing the leftward shift of national politics. During the 1950s and 1960s, Jesse also vigorously defended the racial status quo. He opposed the *Brown v. Board of Education* requirement that segregation in public schools should end, and he resisted federal mandates to end segregation. Helms also strongly attacked the black-led civil rights movement and its white allies, and he maintained that the uprising that they had ignited would lead to the social deterioration of the South. Helms's conservatism combined attributes of opposition to government intervention with resistance to integration, but these positions fell under a general umbrella of anti-Communism.

As a television editorialist who enjoyed a strong following in eastern North Carolina, Helms had expanded his message by offering a critique of the 1960s. During this decade, he initiated a long-standing cultural war against the sexual revolution and the triumph of secularization in American public life. Connecting Helms's message during the 1950s and 1960s was his message about race. He opposed federal intervention, and African American activism, to Helms, was itself a cause of social breakdown. Jesse became very effective in expressing a message of racial politics that transcended the crude segregationism of many of his contemporaries. Translating the debate about civil rights into a debate about individual rights as well as about social decline, in the 1960s Helms played a major role in the racial politics of the post–Civil Rights Act South. These views would remain largely unchanged over the years: Helms was rigidly consistent, and unlike most southern segregationists he never renounced his opposition to the Civil Rights Act. Indeed, he remained as passionately opposed to the civil rights movement's historical legacy.

Helms joined the U.S. Senate on the heels of a rightward turn in American politics occurring during the 1970s and 1980s.[8] Helms occupied a prime seat in this political transformation. Joining the Senate in 1973, for the next seven years he carved out a niche for himself as the most important conservative spokesman in the Senate—and, as a leader of a coalescing right. Opposed to expanding government and what he saw as the liberal establishment, Jesse earned a reputation as "Senator No"—a designation that the *News and Observer* gave him but one that he eagerly embraced—because of his obstructionist parliamentary tactics that led to few victories but considerable publicity about conservative issues. Helms's tactics forced his liberal opponents in the Senate to engage in recorded votes, and he used their votes against them in subsequent elections. As a senator, Helms embraced the agenda of the New Right. In the 1970s, he not only opposed federally

53-34876_ch01.1-625.qxd 17.09.2007 8:56 PM Page 7

mandated school busing for desegregation but also became an unrelenting opponent of legalized abortion and court-enforced bans against prayer in public schools. Rarely did Helms achieve legislative victory: in the 1970s he had little interest in enacting legislation or making policy. Rather, his political strategy was to publicize issues and rally a national conservative constituency.

With this successful political strategy, Helms's message and rhetoric reached new constituencies. Beginning in the 1970s, he encouraged the mobilization of Christian evangelicals, a group that had long remained politically inactive. Raised in a conservative Southern Baptist tradition, Helms believed in traditional Christian values, and his conservatism was rooted in religious fundamentalism. In the senatorial election of 1972, Helms experienced a religious conversion that made his faith and his conviction that God was guiding his actions a central element in his subsequent three decades in the Senate. He had little trouble communicating with Christian evangelicals; he spoke their language. Using issues such as school prayer, nonprofit status for private Christian schools, homosexuality, and the general rubric of "secular humanism," Helms helped to nurture the political organization of Christian evangelicals. He attracted evangelicals' support, and by the late 1970s he had become their most important leader in the Senate. The organization of the Moral Majority in 1979 and the Christian Coalition about a decade later at least partly resulted from Helms's sponsorship, and in North Carolina the mobilization of Christian evangelicals formed a crucial part of his electoral strategy.

Helms rallied his conservative constituency not only because he possessed the forum of the Senate but because he assembled a formidable political machine that succeeded in fund-raising, using broadcast media, and communicating a political message. The North Carolina Congressional Club supplied the muscle for Helms to win elections and to become a national conservative leader, and it pioneered new methods of political communication. Beginning in 1978 and culminating in 1984 and 1990, the club attracted an assortment of committed conservative, youthful ideological, and, most important, creative innovators in a new style of politics that depended on opinion polls, targeted political advertising, and slash-and-burn attacks against their opponents. Between 1978 and 1990, the club became a full-time operation that was constantly engaged in the conservative revolution. It ran Helms's political campaigns and constructed an unequaled fund-raising machine, while it also made Helms substantially more effective than his political enemies in using the media to his advantage. The club and Helms had different interests, but both were bound together by a

53-34876_ch01.1-625.qxd 17.09.2007 8:56 PM Page 8

common desire to promote a conservative revolution nationwide and to obtain and secure political power. The Congressional Club and Helms became known for a bruising, take-no-prisoners political style that relied on character attacks and negative advertising. Helms's political advertising also relied on wedge issues to divide the electorate, most especially issues emphasizing race and sexuality. His political organization pioneered these techniques, which were widely duplicated by political managers on all sides of the ideological spectrum around the country.

After Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, Helms became the American right's leading congressional spokesman. During the subsequent twelve years of Republican control of the White House, Helms usually occupied the right flank, fighting pragmatists and urging purity on conservatism. In the early 1980s, Helms unsuccessfully promoted the New Right's early political agenda on school busing, school prayer, and abortion. Later in the decade, Jesse became the most important opponent of gay rights and public toleration of homosexuals. His war against gay people focused on the AIDS crisis, and Helms maintained that gay rights leaders were attempting to legitimize homosexual behavior in their efforts against the disease. Further, Helms blamed gays for spreading the disease, which he asserted had its origins in what he considered their "disgusting," irresponsible social behavior. Helms waged an ongoing war against homosexual groups into the 1990s, and he became their most important enemy and symbol of public currents of homophobia. Helms's shift to culture war in the late 1980s also included an attack against cultural elites. In 1989, he led a campaign against federal funding for "obscene" art.

While Jesse Helms waged war at home for conservatism, he also opposed the consensus that shaped American foreign policy after 1945. Soon after he arrived in the Senate, he became a persistent opponent of détente and Richard Nixon's attempt to negotiate with the Soviet Union. Believing that détente was a morally bankrupt policy, Helms ardently believed in the destruction of Soviet Communism. Helms's foreign policy positions remained on the margins until the late 1970s, when arms control failed and when Reagan's election ended détente. In the 1970s and 1980s, Helms remained an unrelenting anti-Communist, and his foreign policy increasingly focused on the developing world, where he saw the most potential for Soviet expansion. With little concern for democratic development, Helms backed white minority regimes in southern Africa and authoritarianism in Latin America. Up until the collapse of apartheid, Helms continued to urge American opposition to black-majority governments. Helms remained a loyal supporter of repressive right-wing regimes in Chile and Argentina,

53-34876_ch01.1-625.qxd 17.09.2007 8:56 PM Page 9

where the military seized power through coups and where military governments ruthlessly suppressed the left. In Central America, especially El Salvador and Nicaragua, Helms supported anti-Communist authoritarianism because he saw it as preferable to left-wing triumph.

By the late 1980s, Helms's interest in foreign policy was consuming more of his attention. In 1987, he became ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and from that position a subtle transformation came over his approach to foreign policy. During his early years in the Senate, he had been more interested in ideology than policy; after 1987, policy became his main goal. In Latin America, he shifted attention from unremitting support of rightist regimes to a focus on democracy, human rights, opposition to political corruption, and the drug trade—subjects that made Mexico and Panama important in his thinking. Helms's shift coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union. For most of the 1990s, Helms attempted to define America's position in the post–Cold War world, and his positions were squarely at odds with traditional American foreign policy and the positions of the administration of Bill Clinton.

The final phase of Helms's righteous war was thus waged over foreign policy, and he occupied center stage after November 1994, when Republicans swept to control of Congress and Jesse became chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. For the next six years, Helms promoted a muscular American presence in the world and laid the basis for at least some of the attributes of post-9/11 American unilateralism. Rejecting arms control and multilateralism, he opposed the Clinton administration's diplomacy in Haiti, Bosnia, and the Middle East. Believing that it was ineffective and only benefited America's enemies, Helms opposed the last significant attempts at arms control of the twentieth century. Blocking the Chemical Weapons Convention, in 1999 he helped to lead the successful fight against the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. A longtime opponent of foreign aid, Helms sought to alter the diplomatic bureaucracy. He led congressional efforts to cut the United States's financial contribution to the United Nations, and he insisted on changes in the international organization's structure.

THIS BOOK EXPLORES the various ways in which Jesse Helms, as a righteous warrior, left a permanent stamp on late-twentieth-century American public life. Much of his success and failure lay in Helms's unswerving adherence to principles and his unwillingness to change with the times. An architect of the emergence of the American right, he served as an uncompromising ideologue who helped both to assemble a rhetorical message

53-34876_ch01.1-625.qxd 17.09.2007 8:56 PM Page 10

with wide appeal to ordinary Americans and to fashion a strategy to obtain political power. A majority of North Carolina voters admired Helms's tenacity, and they elected him to the Senate five times. Conservatives nationwide relied on him to energize the movement. In the end, the conservative movement was wrapped up in Helms's career, and his life charts the emergence of modern American conservatism.