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Name any Republican strategy of the past thirty years; chances are Jesse Helms got there first.

By [Ed Kilgore](#)

For an astonishing thirty years, Jesse Helms embodied conservative extremism in the U.S. Senate and the Republican Party; even in his "mellow" final term, ending in 2003, his rare nod toward mainstream opinion served only to highlight the rest of his wildly reactionary views. But was he a political outlier, as his frequent battles with other Republicans—including conservative icon Ronald Reagan—seem to show, or a trendsetter?

William A. Link's scholarly biography of Helms, *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism*, provides considerable ammunition for the latter view, as the subtitle indicates. If this excellent book has one weakness, it's that the author doesn't spend much time in explicit comparisons between Helms and his right-wing allies and successors. But after reading it, I have a hard time thinking of a major aspect of the modern right where Jesse didn't get there first, and with a flourish.

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It's true that Helms wasn't the very first southern conservative Democrat to shift into the GOP because of opposition to civil rights. But he certainly was in the vanguard, and after winning his first Senate race in 1972 with strong support from his conservative Democratic base in the eastern part of North Carolina, he supervised a brisk conquest of the state GOP from its ancient moderate mountains-and-piedmont ownership.

A radio and TV commentator for more than a decade prior to his first run for office in 1972, Helms was unquestionably a pioneer in the media-heavy campaign methods that dominated U.S. politics by the end of the 1980s. Personal campaigning for him was a rarity, and often a sideshow. Given his background, it's interesting that Helms also created a template for conservative demonization of the "liberal media." One of the largely forgotten incidents Link discusses is Helms's brief 1985 campaign to engineer (in conjunction, ironically, with Ted Turner) a hostile takeover of CBS—an early effort to give conservatives a "fair and balanced" television network.

At the same time, Helms was also a key figure in the development of an ideologically motivated small-donor base for the conservative movement and the GOP. Much of Link's book is usefully devoted to Helm's uneasy but integral relationship with the North Carolina-based fund-raising machine the Congressional Club, which started life as a Helms vehicle employing the services of the Thomas Edison of right-wing direct mail, Richard Viguerie.

There are three areas in which Helms's model for other conservatives is better known but sometimes underestimated: culture-war "wedge" politics; legislative obstructionism in the Senate; and an antirealist, unilateralist foreign policy posture.

Helms was undoubtedly the living connection between the racial politics of the Old South and the religion-based cultural politics of the New Right. He was the one surviving segregationist of stature who never regretted or retracted his opposition to the major civil rights legislation of the 1960s. His career-long opposition to any national gesture commemorating the civil rights movement (most notably, his interminable and often scurrilous rearguard efforts to taint the memory of Martin Luther King Jr.) made his strident rhetoric against voting rights enforcement and anything approaching affirmative action an afterthought. And Helms's two reelection campaigns (in 1990 and 1996) against African American Democrat Harvey Gantt pivoted on explicit race baiting, as Helms's Congressional Club allies later admitted to Link.

Helms practically invented the modern conservative politics of sexuality, along with the electoral mobilization of white conservative evangelicals, starting back in the 1970s. In 1977, he seized on Anita Bryant's

successful campaign to overturn a gay rights ordinance in Miami and began building a national backlash against antidiscrimination laws. As early as 1979, he was making speeches about the terrible threat of "secular humanism" to Christianity, making the wonky Aspen Institute of Humanistic Studies an unlikely villain. When the AIDS epidemic emerged in the 1980s, Helms began an extended and violently worded campaign to "protect" Americans from the "perverts" whose "disgusting" habits were responsible for AIDS, while attacking efforts to find effective treatments. Most memorably, Helms single-handedly made the National Endowment of the Arts' subsidies for "obscene" and "homosexual" artwork a culture-war staple for nearly two decades.

In the Senate, Helms was best known, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, for his mastery of Senate procedures to slow down or defeat legislation and nominations he didn't like—usually against a majority of his colleagues—and to create symbolic votes representing his various causes. As Link explains, Helms's main service to the antiabortion movement over the years was his success in creating "test votes" that placed members of Congress on record for or against innocuous-sounding but corrosive amendments aimed at limiting abortion rights. Without question, the guerrilla tactics being employed today by Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell to thwart a Democratic Congress rely heavily on Helms's legislative precedents.

But Helms's abiding passion was his effort to undermine anything approaching multilateralism or diplomacy in foreign policy. His first big splash in national politics was his war on Henry Kissinger's détente policies, culminating in a platform fight at the 1976 Republican National Convention that nearly unraveled Gerald Ford's nomination. During the Carter administration and beyond, Helms employed an intrepid band of staffers who were encouraged to roam around Africa and Latin America building their own intelligence networks and sniffing out insufficient U.S. support for anticommunist insurgencies. He was one of the last to support Pinochet in Chile and the apartheid regime in South Africa, and as late as the 1990s was trying to undermine the democratically elected Chamorro government in Nicaragua for its lack of ruthlessness in purging Sandinistas. And long after the end of the cold war, Helms focused much of his energies during the Clinton administration fighting the United Nations and a variety of multilateral treaties and organizations.

Most of all, Helms spent his entire thirty years in the Senate battling the State Department's career diplomats and championing a guns-and-ideology approach to foreign policy that blended Old Right isolationist tendencies with New Right militarism and imperial arrogance.

Although Helms announced his retirement from the Senate a few weeks prior to 9/11, and left office at the end of 2002, there's not much

question that he placed a large imprint on the post-9/11 Bush administration foreign policy. When Donald Rumsfeld tossed the State Department-prepared plan for postinvasion Iraq into the nearest trash can, the Helms legacy reached its apogee.

More broadly, Helms's fingerprints were all over the Bush-Rove political strategy of polarization, which achieved the kind of narrow presidential reelection victory in 2004 that characterized every Helms electoral contest (he never won more than 53 percent of the vote in North Carolina). In election after election, Helms dealt with his extremist image not by moderating his policies or appeals, but by painting his opponent as equally or even more extreme. Indeed, in his toughest race—his 1984 come-from-behind win over Jim Hunt—he eerily anticipated the 2004 "flip-flop" campaign against John Kerry, with ads that endlessly challenged Hunt with the taunt, "Where do you stand, Jim?" And as Bush and Rove did in 2004, Helms successfully suggested that his Democratic opponent's waffling disguised a leftist agenda that would not survive exposure.

It's hard to avoid the conclusion that Jesse Helms was not an outlier, but instead an avatar of a style of politics and policy that has characterized the rise and fall of the right from Reagan to George W. Bush. While those competing to succeed Bush in the GOP have learned to avoid emulation of most of Helms's out-front extremist rhetoric and some of Bush's specific mistakes, even a casual look at their policy views shows that Helms's legacy lives on, from talk about the "religion of secularism" to the bizarre suggestion that Bush has failed through insufficient conservatism at home and abroad.

Any review of a biography, of course, requires some mention of the personality of the subject himself. And Link is clearly ambivalent about Helms's character. He credits Helms for consistency (to a fault), for devotion to family and friends, for his legendary "courtliness," particularly toward women, and for his unassuming lifestyle. Link also dutifully reports the incidents that were interpreted as signs of a late-career mellowing: Helms's early-1990s split with the Congressional Club, his purge of right-wing entrepreneurs from his foreign policy staff at about the same time, and, most famously, the unlikely alliance this inveterate foreign-aid hater formed with Bono in support of a large increase for assistance to Africa, and even for AIDS relief on that continent (where most victims were not, presumably, "perverts").

But other aspects of Helms's personality cannot be ignored, particularly his venomous assault on Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy and his virulent hatred of gays and lesbians. For years, as part of his campaign against the NEA, this "courtly" Christian carried around portfolios of homoerotic Mapplethorpe photos and showed them to reporters and (male) citizens with the question, "How do you like them apples?" And as late as 1995,

when an old friend wrote him to recommend compassion for people like her gay son, who had died of AIDS, Helms wrote back to say, "I wish he had not played Russian roulette with his sexual activities."

All in all, I wish that Jesse Helms had not played Russian roulette with his country's politics and policies. He knew no limits to his extremism, and tutored a whole generation of conservatives in extremist strategy and tactics. His legacy is as bitter and unforgiving as his rhetoric. Professor Link is to be congratulated for thoroughly bringing back so many bad but important memories.

Ed Kilgore is managing editor of the *Democratic Strategist*.



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