

When Jesse Was at the Helm

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Righteous Warrior

By William A. Link

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

By any measure, Jesse Helms, the former five-term U.S. senator from North Carolina (now 86 and retired), has been one of the most momentous figures in modern American political history. He arguably saved the political career of Ronald Reagan, played a lead role in bringing the organizational muscle of evangelical Christians into the Republican coalition, leveled justified and withering criticism at the United Nations and its corrupt ways, and unstintingly laid down an anticommunist marker in Central America in the 1980s. His efforts made the world a better place.

But there can be no doubt that Mr. Helms, with his blunt, angry rhetoric and frequent reactionary rigidity, encouraged the growth of a slash-and-burn style in American politics. Worse, he gave voice, early in his career, to bigotry against black Americans and, later, against homosexuals. His words poisoned otherwise defensible arguments about public policy.

The mixed legacy may explain why conservatives these days so seldom adduce Helms as a hero of their party, allowing the positive aspects of his legacy to go unheralded. Now along comes William A. Link, a self-proclaimed political liberal, to fill the silence. As he writes: "Perhaps because of the tendency to view Helms in ideological terms, he has been widely underestimated, misunderstood, and even ignored by journalists and historians."

"Righteous Warrior" is an admirably thorough and fair treatment of a controversial figure, though a bit dry and soulless given the drama that Jesse Helms brought to political life. Mr. Link acknowledges Mr. Helms's estimable qualities right away. His opening paragraph notes a 1998 survey of 1,200 congressional staffers that rated Mr. Helms among the "nicest" members of the U.S. Senate. Mr. Link spends the next several pages cataloging Mr. Helms's manifold personal kindnesses, his responsiveness to constituents, his strong work ethic and other virtues. Immediately we see a man of charm and substance, and we understand how a North Carolina voting public could continue to elect him despite the national media's eagerness to demonize him.

Mr. Helms's career before being elected to the Senate in 1972 included working as a newspaper editor in the 1940s and as a television and radio executive in the 1960s -

- media posts from which he "articulated a timely critique of modern liberalism and its bastions among intellectuals, the press, universities, government, and policymakers," Mr. Link writes. After arriving in the Senate, Mr. Helms almost single-handedly brought Alexander Solzhenitsyn to the U.S. (defying the reluctance of President Ford and Henry Kissinger); highlighted the dangers of detente with the Soviet Union; played a major role in making the Republican Party officially pro-life; fought endless battles against wasteful federal spending; and blew the whistle on the corruption of Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega long before the Reagan and Bush administrations admitted that their ally was a drug-pushing thug. Later in his career, Mr. Helms built bipartisan coalitions to push reforms in foreign-aid programs and at the U.N., in both cases improving transparency and accountability at least at the margins. Beginning in the late 1990s, he famously joined with rock star Bono to focus attention on the epidemics of AIDS and poverty in Africa.

As for saving Ronald Reagan: It was Mr. Helms and his political organization, the North Carolina Congressional Club, that rescued Reagan's presidential campaign in 1976 when it was dead broke and winless in five earlier state primaries or caucuses. Without Reagan's key victory in the Tarheel State that year, almost entirely masterminded by the Congressional Club, Reagan's political career might have ended in a shambles.

The Congressional Club, over several decades, used smashmouth political tactics, massive fund-raising efforts and all the tools of mass media to tear apart political opponents with gusto. The organization was spectacularly successful not just at getting Mr. Helms re-elected but also at building a larger, stronger Republican Party in North Carolina. Between 1982 and 1984, as the Congressional Club geared up for Mr. Helms's epic re-election battle against Democratic Gov. Jim Hunt, the percentage of all eligible voters who were registered in North Carolina grew to 77% from 58%, with Republicans outpacing Democrats among new enrollees. By one estimate, Republicans registered 150,000 white evangelicals in that short time, with total GOP registration soaring by 24%.

Many of the new voters were surely stirred to participate in politics by Mr. Helms's appeals to God and country. But he also exploited race and sexuality in malevolent ways, as Mr. Link perhaps too enthusiastically chronicles with multiple and lengthy examples. Mr. Helms himself, ever courteous in person to all people, never quite understood why black voters appeared to dislike him, and he honestly did not consider himself a racist. But he spent a lifetime defending segregation -- not just as a constitutional matter but as a social arrangement of inherent value. Conservatives who deny Mr. Helms's clay feet on race, and who therefore refuse to understand why the conservative movement has been tarred with guilt by association with one of its most high-profile leaders, will never make headway against the deeply ingrained suspicions of black voters who might otherwise give conservative positions a fair hearing.

Mr. Helms was also wont to turn a blind eye to the sins of authoritarianism. In the

early 1980s, he refused to acknowledge evidence of the murderous associations of Salvadoran rightist Roberto D'Aubuisson. And throughout that decade he too eagerly defended the leaders of South Africa's apartheid government. In support of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet's imposition of martial law in 1986, Mr. Helms bizarrely asserted that even the U.S. Constitution "provides martial law, with all the implications of that. . . . If that's an extreme statement, then so be it."

Critics will find in "Righteous Warrior" plenty of evidence that Mr. Helms was a champion obstructionist, a holder of grudges and even a sharp-tongued demagogue. (One man's "demagoguery" might be another man's well-aimed humor, though, as when Mr. Helms on the Senate floor once said he was unable to match Ted Kennedy in "decibels or Jezebels, or anything else, apparently.") For other readers, Mr. Helms's flaws will be more than balanced by the humanity of the senator who wept at Bono's descriptions of AIDS-stricken children and who was described even by liberal Democratic colleague Joe Biden as "one of the most thoughtful, considerate and gracious senators I have ever served with."

Conservatives can also take solace that, on matters where Jesse Helms was in the wrong, he almost always, in the long run, failed. But where he did achieve lasting success, he was usually not just on the right but in the right, to the benefit of his country.