Jesse Helms to retire from US Senate: a career based on racism, bigotry and contempt for democratic rights

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The announcement by North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms that he will retire rather than run for reelection in 2002 has produced the outpouring of clichés, designed to conceal rather than illuminate, that is generally churned out by the American media in lieu of political analysis. Not a single commentator on the television networks, cable outlets or major daily newspapers would address the central issue: what does it say about modern American politics that a proponent of racism and repression at home, and defender of fascist and military dictatorships abroad, should play such a major role?

Helms began his career as a radio spokesman for segregation, anticommunism and religious fundamentalism, and never moved far from this noxious political axis. Born in Monroe, North Carolina in 1921, he received some initial training in radio in the military during World War II and returned to take a position at a radio station in the state capital, Raleigh.

In 1950 he worked as a researcher for racist Democratic Senate candidate Willis Smith, whose campaign included a doctored photo of the incumbent's wife dancing with a black man. (Helms biographer Ernest Furgurson reports the claim that Helms personally cut up the photos and combined them.)

Helms went to Washington as Smith's staff administrative assistant, then returned to North Carolina two years later as executive director of the state's banking association, where he spent seven years helping enrich the financial institutions that exploited the struggling farmers and small businessmen Helms would later claim to represent. He also ran for and won a seat on the Raleigh City Council.

In 1960 Helms took a job as a TV commentator, the position that would prove the real launching pad for his political rise. For 12 years he railed against "Negro hoodlums," "sex perverts," Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights "agitators," and denounced welfare recipients, saying in one broadcast, "A lot of human beings have been born bums."

By 1972 the Democratic Party in North Carolina was deeply split over the issue of race. Senator B. Everett Jordan, a three-term incumbent and longtime defender of segregation, was challenged for the Democratic nomination by Congressman Nick Galifianakis, who won a bitter primary fight with the support of many newly registered black voters. Helms switched parties, sought the Republican nomination and won a narrow victory, becoming the first Republican ever to win a Senate race in North Carolina. Former Democrats, many motivated by white racism, provided his 54-46 percent margin.

A similar pattern developed throughout the region—hailed by President Richard Nixon as a vindication of his "Southern strategy." The Republican Party, once the party of Abraham Lincoln, revived its fortunes in the South by adopting the cause of racial prejudice, under a thin disguise of opposing "special privileges" for blacks. Helms followed in the footsteps of other diehard racist politicians, like Strom Thurmond of neighboring South Carolina, in switching parties. But more than any of them, even Thurmond, he retained the closest ties to far-right and Ku Klux Klan elements openly committed to white supremacy.

The Republican Party never established complete predominance in North Carolina, with conservative Democrats retaining control of the state legislature and the governorship for most of Helms' 30 years in the Senate. Helms' own seat was never secure, not so much because of the black vote—less than 20 percent in the state—but because of deep-seated opposition among workers of all races to a politician so closely linked to the banks and the textile and tobacco bosses. Helms never won more than 55 percent of the vote in any of his races, while the state's other Senate seat changed parties every six years, as four consecutive incumbents were defeated for reelection.

Helms held on, not so much because of his in-state popularity, but due to the powerful financial backing of big business and right-wing elements nationally. He became the principal spokesman for what is, in all but name, the fascist wing of the Republican Party, voicing their obsessive hatred of blacks, immigrants, gays, liberals, socialists, foreigners and the United Nations. Helms developed an enormous nationwide fundraising machine and spent record amounts to eke out reelection after reelection—he spent more than $10 million in 1984 and a staggering $16 million in 1996, in a state with only a handful of mid-sized media markets.

In the Senate, Helms could be counted on, not only to vote against any semblance of progressive reform, but also to engage in tirades and one-man delaying tactics that frequently prevailed against the increasingly timid stance of the waning group of liberals. He opposed minimum wage increases, abortion and fetal tissue research, food stamps, anti-pollution legislation, reparations for the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the establishment of Martin Luther King Day as a national holiday. He regularly backed legislation tailored to the religious right, including bills to reestablish Christian prayer in the public schools, outlaw flag burning and bar any federal action to protect the rights of gays and lesbians.

In one revealing episode in 1982, when the Reagan administration grudgingly supported reauthorization of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, Helms waged war against the bill, introducing amendment after amendment—to exempt North Carolina counties from its provisions, to weaken the enforcement powers of the Civil Rights Division of the US Department of Justice, to reduce the extension from 25 years to 15 years. All were defeated by overwhelming bipartisan majorities. Ultimately, Helms voted against final passage of a bill that even Strom Thurmond eventually supported.

His greatest impact on government policy was in foreign affairs. He obtained a seat on the Foreign Relations Committee and used it to attack

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Third World regimes that he regarded as "communist," applying this label to any nationalist government that came into conflict with American foreign policy. Cuban President Fidel Castro was naturally his number one target, and when the Republican Party gained control of Congress in the 1994 elections he sponsored the Helms-Burton Act, which imposed tight trade restrictions on American companies, as well as corporations based in Europe and Asia, that sought business dealings with the island nation.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Helms was a leading backer of right-wing terrorist groups opposed to the regimes that he demonized: UNITA in Angola, the RENAMO guerrillas in Mozambique, the Contras in Nicaragua, the Afghan mujahedin. He gave full support to apartheid South Africa and to military dictatorships in Central and South America.

When presented with evidence that Roberto D'Aubuisson, the US-backed death squad leader in El Salvador, was involved in atrocious human rights abuses, Helms responded, "All I know is that D'Aubuisson is a free enterprise man and deeply religious." One peace activist who met with Helms staffers to describe the murders of Nicaraguan doctors, nurses and children by the Contras was told, "Well, they're just communists—they deserve to die."

In his early years in the Senate Helms was viewed as an eccentric, a peculiar throwback to a more primitive political era. It is a measure of the sharp shift to the right in the whole official political spectrum in the United States that such a figure eventually came to be regarded as an ideological standard-bearer of the majority party in Congress, a man whose support was courted by presidential candidates and cabinet officials—as in the disgusting display of groveling by Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

Even late in his career Helms occasionally outflanked his own party from the right, as in 1997, when he blocked the nomination of fellow Republican William F. Weld, then governor of Massachusetts, as ambassador to Mexico, because of his liberal views on certain cultural issues.

One of his most notorious moments came during President Clinton's first term, when he told a television interviewer that neither he nor most of the military believed that Clinton was qualified to be commander-in-chief. He added that because of Clinton's views on gays in the military, and his history of opposition to the Vietnam War, the president was extremely unpopular on North Carolina military bases. "Mr. Clinton better watch out if he comes down here," Helms said. "He'd better have a bodyguard."

When this incitement to violence was referred to the Secret Service, Helms issued a brief retraction. But the statement clearly expressed the hostility to democracy that motivated the entire right-wing campaign against the Clinton White House, culminating in impeachment.

Despite this record of unmitigated reaction, there was no lack of Democrats and liberals who offered tributes to Helms after the senator announced his impending retirement. For the most part, the media presented the arch reactionary as a distinguished spokesman for a legitimate point of view.

Richard Holbrooke, US ambassador to the United Nations under Clinton, absurdly compared Helms to Henry Cabot Lodge Sr., the Boston aristocrat who led opposition to US entry into the League of Nations in 1919. Democratic Senator Christopher Dodd said it was "the power of his personality that makes him special as a force" in the Senate. "People knew if he was the only person on your side, he'd stick with you."

Senator Joseph Biden, a leading Democrat who worked with Helms on the Foreign Relations Committee, gushed, "Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Jesse Helms is that, notwithstanding his conservative credentials, when confronted with new facts, he is willing to reconsider his position."

Perhaps the worst perversion of the truth came from Walter Russell Meade, a liberal historian and senior fellow at New York University's World Policy Institute, who published a column in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "Farewell to a Great Jacksonian." Meade suggested that Helms "deserves to be remembered as one of a handful of men who brought white Southern conservatives into a new era of race relations." Meade said that Helms had urged compliance with civil rights legislation, since it was the law, even though he disagreed with it.

The reality is that Helms fought against racial reconciliation every day of his political life, with only slight changes in terminology. As late as 1990, in his reelection contest against former Charlotte Mayor Harvey Gantt, the first black man to run for US Senator in North Carolina as a candidate of the Democratic or Republican parties, Helms employed crude race-baiting. A television ad that gained national notoriety featured white hands holding a letter rejecting a job application, while the announcer explained that affirmative action was responsible. Helms and his campaign subsequently settled a Justice Department complaint over a pre-election mailing of postcards falsely threatening 125,000 black voters with jail if they went to the polls.

Bigotry was the font of Helms' politics. His home town, Monroe, was notorious as a stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan. Racial oppression was so intense that it sparked one of the most important acts of armed resistance by black residents during the civil rights era, led by Robert F. Williams, head of the Monroe NAACP. Williams was ultimately framed up on charges of terrorism and fled the United States, living for a decade in exile in Cuba and China. A new biography of the civil rights leader recounts an incident of his boyhood:

"Walking down Main Street, Williams watched a white police officer accost an African American woman. The policeman, Jesse Alexander Helms Sr., an admirer once recalled, 'had the sharpest shoe in town and he didn't mind using it.' His son, U.S. Senator Jesse Helms, remembered 'Big Jesse' as 'a six-foot, two hundred pound gorilla—when he said "smile," I smiled.' Eleven-year-old Robert Williams looked on in terror as Big Jesse flattened the black woman with his huge fists, then 'dragged her off to the nearby jailhouse, her dress up over her head, the same way that a cave man would club and drag his sexual prey.' Williams recalled 'her tortured screams as the flesh was ground away from the friction of the concrete.' The memory of this violent spectacle and the laughter of white bystanders haunted him for decades." (Quoted from Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*, University of North Carolina Press, 2001)

Such was the environment that produced Jesse Helms. It is an indictment of American capitalist society that this son of a racist policeman, bigot and defender of mass murderers became a powerful figure in American politics. Like scum on a stagnant pond, the rottenest elements in American society rose to the top of the political system during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

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