

HELMS: What Makes Him Tick

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"My father had a fifth-grade education. Never made over \$7,500 in any year of his life. He was a soul of honor," Helms says, grinning pleasantly at the thought. "If I had my one wish, I wish I could be as decent a human being as he was."

Helms remembers what his mother told him each morning to get his blood stirring. "My momma used to say, 'Get out of that bed, boy! You can't make a nickel there.' Helms pauses and says, "They were just great folks."

Perhaps as important in Helms' youth was Ray W. House, his high school principal who still lives in Monroe. He was the first person to insist that Helms aim high, have a vision of power and work as hard as possible.

House, 79, has no problem remembering young Jesse — a tall, energetic lad who played the tuba. Besides being principal, teacher and spiritual leader, House also directed the band. And because Helms was about the tallest student in school, he would lay down his tuba and be the drum major when the band marched.

"They were all grouped together," House says. "They were in band together. They dated together. They almost lived together." By "they," House refers to Helms, Bud Nance, Hargrove Bowles, Henry Hall Wilson and Bill Hinson.

While Helms left Monroe and later became a U.S. senator, his classmates also fared well. Nance is a retired Navy rear admiral. Wilson was an aide to President John F. Kennedy and Gov. Terry Sanford. Bowles was a 1972 Democratic gubernatorial candidate, and Hinson was one of North Carolina's first oral surgeons.

"I think anybody who went to school under Ray W. House will testify under oath that he had a profound influence," Helms says. "There wasn't any question about whether he loved us or not or cared for us. He did the best to push everyone up and ahead."

House downplays the unusual success of his graduates.

"They keep saying, 'You had an influence on us.' Ain't a word of that so," House says. "It's the old Christian ethic. Families taught it to them. School teachers didn't. I didn't."

But House and Jesse's parents did teach Jesse the deep meaning of the word "principle." Today, his every action is rooted in the principles that were developed early.

"You have to have certain basic principles," Helms says. "And you better be doggone certain that they're predicated on what's fair, what's possible, what's equitable and what's honest."

Like the Ten Commandments that guide his life, Helms' principles are virtually written in stone. Unyielding. Unchanging. Seldom compromised, if ever.

Bill Hinson, one of Helms' high school classmates, says Jesse hasn't changed much over the years. "He was just never that stubborn in high school," says Hinson, a native of Monroe who now lives in High Point.

Helms was a good student but not outstanding. Boys were ashamed to be good students back then, House recalls. The girls made A's and the boys made B's and C's.

But while the girls were cracking the books, Helms was working. It was the Depression in Monroe in the 1930s and in every other town across America. And following the example of his hard-working father, Helms worked eagerly at every job he could find: jerking sodas at Jones Drug Co., delivering groceries on weekends and writing sports articles while in high school for the *Monroe Journal*. He usually made two or three dollars a weekend.

A lot has changed in Monroe since Helms grew up there. Most of the buildings from his day are gone, including the First Baptist Church and the pool hall, where most people hung out. There are five times as many people and ten times as many cars as there were in the 1930s. Jesse's old high school has been converted to an elementary school.

But much of what Helms says and does can be traced to this small town in the southern Piedmont of North Carolina, which had only five registered Republicans in 1938.

"All of Jesse's conservatism is based here," House says.

A passion for journalism

In 1938, Helms and about 50 others graduated from Monroe High. Jesse went on to Wingate College, a small Baptist school just up the road. In the fall he transferred to Wake Forest College (then located a few miles north of Raleigh), where his love of working in journalism clashed with his quest for higher education.

Jesse left Wake Forest after a year and never finished college. (He is one of a handful of senators without a college degree.) There are several ironies related to Helms' journalistic ambitions. A 1938 high school commencement pamphlet said he wanted to be a columnist. In fact, he loved journalism so much he passed up the chance to finish college. Instead, he took a sports writing position with a Raleigh newspaper.

Today Helms' biggest complaint is with the institution he idolized as a youth — the mass media. He has drawn sharp criticism for his recent campaign for conservatives to buy control of CBS-TV, whose news coverage Helms believes is slanted by liberal journalists.

"The news media in this country constitute the greatest problem because they are preventing the American people from really understanding the issues," Helms says. "The people of this country are misled on practically every major issue that comes down the pike."

And the newspaper that Helms despises today is the very one where he accepted his first major reporting job and where he met his wife Dorothy. A graduate of the UNC School of Journalism, Dorothy Coble was society editor at *The News and Observer* in Raleigh when she met Jesse. They were married in 1942, soon after Jesse turned 21.

Just meat and potatoes

By 1960, Jesse and Dot had settled with their two daughters into a comfortable two-story brick house in Raleigh. Jane was 14 and Nancy 11. Two years later the Helmses adopted Charles, a 9-year-old with cerebral palsy, after reading a

Jesse



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newspaper article about the Greensboro orphan. Now Mrs. Helms says the family has forgotten that Charles was adopted. "He's just like the rest," she says.

Although her husband is almost always busy, Mrs. Helms says the two often talk after dinner, which is usually a simple meal. "Jesse is a meat and potatoes man," says a frustrated Mrs. Helms. "He likes steak and french fries. He's not much on me trying out my new recipes."

The Helmses spend most of the year at their house in Arlington, Va., which Helms bought in 1973 after winning his first Senate election.

Helms lives his work. His daily routine leaves little time for relaxation and entertainment. When the Senate is in session, Helms usually rises at 6 or 6:30 and reads the newspaper while Dot cooks breakfast. He eats and heads for the Senate office building in downtown Washington, a 30- to 45-minute drive, depending on traffic.

If the Senate adjourns on time, Helms will get home by 7 p.m. and eat dinner with his wife. Then they usually talk — what else? — politics.

"I always enjoy hearing what's going on on the Senate floor that day and the people who he's met with," Mrs. Helms says. "I'm always curious." Helms usually works at his desk a couple of hours before making his usual bedtime: 11 o'clock.

Helms is not much of a hobby person, his wife says. His main enjoyment in life is his five grandchildren, two of whom live next door in Raleigh with his oldest daughter, Jane. He watches little TV — except for the evening news — and has seen only a few movies. "Patton" and "The Sound of Music" are among his favorites.

He doesn't play cards much any more. He and his Raleigh political cronies used to gather for a friendly game of poker — 10 cents a bet. Now and then he'll light up an unfiltered Lucky Strike and take a few puffs.

Conservative philosophy takes root

Soon after Jesse and Dot were married in 1942, Helms joined the Navy as a specialist first class, writing press releases on the mainland. When World War II ended in 1945, Helms was hired by the *Raleigh Times* as an assistant city editor. But Helms became restless in Raleigh, and he decided to dabble in another medium — radio.

He spent two years as a radio disc jockey in Roanoke Rapids, N.C., before realizing that he wasn't cut out for it. He returned to the capital city in 1948 to work for WRAL radio as a reporter.

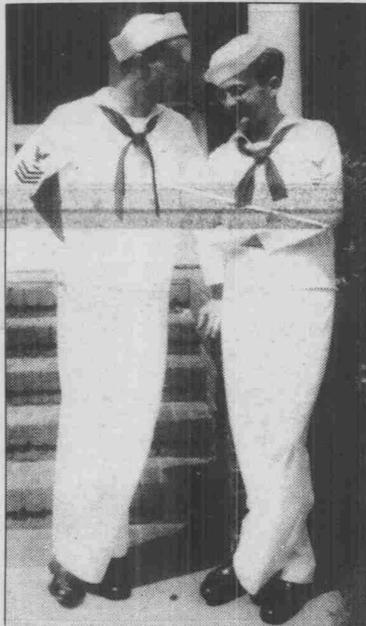
Helms settled down for a few years and let his roots take hold. It was in Raleigh that most people say his political opinions were forged by such conservatives as A.J. Fletcher, former owner of WRAL radio and television, and Tom Ellis, a successful lawyer who now chairs the Congressional Club. The club was formed to retire Helms' 1972 campaign debt but has grown into one of the largest and richest political-action committees in the nation.

Until 1950, Helms was a relatively unknown political figure in North Carolina. But that would soon change.

With racial and anti-Communist paranoia running high in North Carolina in 1950, a Raleigh politician named Willis Smith staged a controversial U.S. Senate primary campaign against Frank Porter Graham, a personable and popular former UNC president. *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker, some years after the race, wrote a novel based on the dirty politicking in which some people say Helms participated.

Graham won the primary but not a majority of the votes. So Smith was entitled to a runoff, and Helms took Smith's campaign to the airwaves. Helms says he plugged for Smith but denies any part in the deceitful racial tactics that brought national attention to the Senate race and confirmed the suspicion that racism was still breeding in the South.

Smith won. Four years later, Helms left Raleigh for Washington to become one of his



Helms and Raleigh roommate Ed Rankin joining the Navy in 1942.

aides. But Smith died in his fifth year in office, and Helms returned to his home state, where he became executive editor of the N.C. Bankers' Association.

Helms had developed a flair for writing in his early jobs, and it showed in the bankers' association magazine that Helms edited.

"Compromise, hell!" he wrote in a 1953 issue of *Tarheel Banker*. "That's what has happened to us all down the line — and that's the whole cause of our woes." Principles such as freedom, he said, should not be treated as a "roll of bologna to be bartered a slice at a time."

Helms liked his work. But he still had the itch for political involvement and in 1957 was elected to the Raleigh City Council. He served two, two-year terms before leaving the council in 1961.

He went back to work for Fletcher, a media mogul, who remained a close friend until his death in 1979. This time Helms experimented with yet another medium — television. Little did he know that he would become a household figure as a WRAL-TV editorialist.

Helms attracted a faithful following much like J.R. Ewing of "Dallas." You either hated Jesse or you loved him. He attacked liberals and praised conservatives. He opposed civil rights legislation and favored segregation. In the spirit of Joseph McCarthy, he continued to spread the word throughout the 1960s in his TV editorials that communism threatened U.S. society.

Where do you stand, Jesse?

"Only two things in life are certain," so the saying goes, "death and taxes." But North Carolinians add a third item: Jesse Helms will always be conservative. Since his first day in the Senate in January 1973, Helms has fought for prayer in the public schools, a constitutional amendment outlawing abortion, an end to busing, a strong national defense and protection of the free enterprise system.

Helms is proud of his bulldog attitude, and he put it to work during his most recent political tangle for the Senate with Gov. Jim Hunt.

Many political observers called it the Senate race of the century. It was a confrontation of old and new. A battle of Old South politics tinged

with racial overtones against a progressive New South of economic growth and booming university research centers.

Part of Helms' \$13.5 million campaign was a series of radio and television commercials that portrayed Hunt as two-faced and indecisive. The commercials, which began airing a year and a half before the election, ended with Helms asking, "Where do you stand, Jim?"

All over North Carolina, people mimicked the phrase. It ranked second only to Wendy's catchline, "Where's the beef?"

Before Helms began his 18-month barrage of blistering attacks, Hunt led in public opinion polls by 52 to 43 percent. Five months before the election, Helms had overtaken Hunt: 50 to 46 percent.

Hunt said his drop in the polls was because of Helms' "sleazy, scurrilous ads... to tear down my character and reputation. They have used so much of them with so much money that they obviously have an impact."

Hunt was right. In a state where Democrats hold a 3-to-1 margin in registered voters, Helms was able to defeat a handsome, popular young governor who was a rising star in the Democratic Party. There were more "God-fearing conservatives" in North Carolina than most people had thought.

But looking back over Helms' career, his support of the conservative agenda has often left him standing all alone in right field. He remembers the Falkland Islands issue when he was the only senator to vote against a resolution aligning the United States with Great Britain.

"It wasn't because I don't like Margaret Thatcher," Helms recalls. "She's a good friend of mine. But Maggie was dead wrong about that thing. That little old piece of real estate down there wasn't worth the three or four billion dollars it cost the two countries and the lives of 1,200 boys."

It's not difficult to stand alone, he says, even when the state's second largest newspaper criticizes his every move. Claude Sitton, Pulitzer prize-winning editor of *The News and Observer*, dubbed Helms "Senator No" during the late 1970s because of his frequent dissenting votes on key social and economic issues during the Carter administration.

The News and Observer has been a long-standing opponent of Sen. Helms," says editorial-page editor Ferrel Guillory. "He represents a viewpoint with which we strongly disagree. It strikes me as rather strange that people would elect someone who carries out policy that everyone disagrees with."

Guillory said Helms' 1984 Senate victory was due partly to his campaign smears of Hunt. And although Hunt countered with his own negative ads, Guillory says Helms is an old hand at political sleaze. Guillory cited the 1950 Smith campaign and Helms' 1972 Senate race against Nick Galifianakis, a Durham attorney of Greek descent. "Jesse Helms: He's one of us," was the senator's winning slogan. WASPs liked it. Minorities were angered by it.

How does Helms respond to such criticisms? "I don't pay any attention to it," he says. "If you're trying to please everyone in the United States Senate, you're going to be a flop! You've got to find out what your positions are and justify them and stand there."

"I am not a racist"

Although he consistently opposes civil rights legislation and supports segregationist policies, Helms says he is not a racist. Even when he was the ONLY senator to vote against a national holiday to honor Martin Luther King Jr., he stuck by his guns.

"I am not a racist, and I am not a bigot," Helms told reporters who questioned his filibuster on the King holiday. "Ask any black that knows me, and they will tell you that I am not."

The black person who is usually asked is his former press secretary, Claude Allen. Before

hiring Allen in 1983, Helms had no blacks on his 120-member staff. Allen repeatedly backs Helms' denial, but he recently resigned to take a press position with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"The problem has always been the image that Jesse Helms works against blacks," Allen says. "That's just not so." Most blacks are politically conservative, Allen says, but they think they're liberal.

"They rolled out the red carpet for me," Allen says, but there are no minorities on the senator's staff now because few will apply or inquire about jobs.

Some say Helms' attitudes are the product of living in the South when racism was the fashion.

"Segregation was a way of life," Principal House recalls. "We couldn't have done anything. If we would have started a fight against it, somebody would have shot us. You had to live like that. But we didn't have malice."

Helms says his motives are often misunderstood by the press. As an example, he cites his vote on the Civil Rights Act extension.

He says the press described the act as a bill "that would make it possible for everyone to vote."

"But it had nothing to do with voting rights," Helms counters. "That was already established. It was instead a wolf in sheep's clothing. It had a good title, but the guts of it were bad."

Former U.S. Sen. Sam Ervin agrees. In fact, Ervin agrees with Helms on most constitutional issues, except school prayer. "He's pretty faithful to the constitution," says Ervin, 88, who left the Senate in 1974 to return to his native North Carolina.

Ervin says he admires Helms for taking firm stands amid controversies. Ervin also backed Helms when he opposed the Civil Rights Act extension. "That act violates the constitution in about 10 different ways," Ervin says.

But why can Ervin oppose civil rights legislation and not be called a racist? UNC political scientist Thad Beyle says the answer is simple.

"Helms uses race in a political sense to further his cause or causes," says Beyle, who scrutinized the Helms-Hunt race.

Before the King holiday bill was voted on in October 1983, Hunt led Helms by 20 percentage points in most opinion polls. But after Helms was spotlighted as the sole holdout on the bill, the gap closed.

A horse race developed, and Helms nosed Hunt out. He won the entire state by 80,000 votes — and 70,000 of them came from a band of textile counties populated by lower-class whites, Beyle says.

Hunt captured 99.8 percent of the black vote, Helms 0.2 percent. The implications were easy to read — in black and white.

"North Carolinians are not as nice and progressive as most people would like to think," Beyle says.

Editor Guillory agrees. Racism was "one piece of the fabric that allowed Helms to win," Guillory says. "I don't have the foggiest doubt that race still moves people."

Running on principles

Although he is always in the middle of such controversies, Helms sometimes questions his own involvement in politics. He admits that he wanted to leave Washington for good after his second term.

"I didn't want to get into politics in the first place," Helms says. "I didn't want to run in 1972. If I had known I was going to be elected, I'm not so sure I would have run."

So why did Helms seek a third term?

"We (Dot and I) had no intentions of running again," Helms says. "I would not have run for a third term except for the fact that conservatives came to Dot and persuaded her that we might lose the Senate majority."

Friends say Helms stays in politics not because of the power and glory but because he cares about people.

"He's probably one of the most unselfish people I've ever met," Hinson says. "His concern for people started back in high school. He always wanted to help people with their troubles."

His mentor and confidant paints the same picture.

"Service to fellow man, that's what motivates Jesse," says House, who talks with Jesse on the telephone about once every two weeks. "I'll bet you he's the only one up there (in Washington) that hasn't made a fortune of it. All he owns is that house in Raleigh. He doesn't even have the one in Arlington paid for yet. I reckon he could."

Others say Helms is nowhere near good-hearted or unselfish. They believe his right-wing politics threaten personal freedom, perpetuate racism and ignore the majority of the state's residents.

"Jesse Helms is a disgrace to North Carolina," says a tobacco farmer, the grassroots of Helms' support. "One of his Washington colleagues, Sen. Alan Cranston, criticizes Helms' unpopular antics. 'Since Jesse Helms started his warfare against all those who disagree with him,' Cranston says, 'there's a meanness in the Senate now that I don't think there has been since the days of Joe McCarthy.'"

Those who fear Helms' power are looking nervously to 1988. There is already considerable speculation about Republican candidates. Near the top of the list: Jesse Alexander Helms Jr. Conservatives are looking for a dynamic leader when Reagan steps down, analyst Beyle says, and Helms "is likely to be a candidate in '88."

But Helms, his wife and close friends dispel such talk emphatically. During an interview at his office, the shortest reply to any question was "No" when asked if he would seek the Republican nomination in 1988.

Attempting to sum up his personal motivations and philosophies, Helms says government would not be necessary if everyone lived by the Ten Commandments.

"Moral responsibility is the bedrock of what I'm talking about, and there's too little of that today," Helms says sternly, gazing over his horn-rimmed glasses.

"I guess what I care about is being true to the principles I believe in so that I won't have to look in the mirror at a guy who has wretched on a commitment."



Helms in 1984



Helms in 1946