

FORUM

Helms was a racist to the end



George Curry
Guest Columnist

Jesse Helms, an unrepentant racist, died on July 4. When most racists die, public discussions generally center on other aspects of their life and their racial views are thrown in as an afterthought. In the case of Helms, the former North Carolina senator, he was such a virulent racist that his unrelenting attacks on civil rights could not go unnoted.

Writing in the Charlotte Observer, columnist Jack Betts observed, "He used the language of the Jim Crow era to fight for a culture that kept public schools segregated, public accommodations white and that regarded any government attempt to wipe out discrimination as un-American."

He referred to UNC - the University of North Carolina - as the University of Negroes and Communists.

Helms incorrectly claimed Dr. Martin Luther King was influenced by the Communist Party and credited that for everything King did, from leading protests to opposing the war in Vietnam. Prior to entering the Senate, Helms, then a television commentator, said, "Dr. (Martin Luther) King's outfit ... is heavily laden at the top with leaders of proven records of communism, socialism and sex perversion, as well as other curious behavior."

He dismissed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as "the single most dangerous piece of legislation ever introduced in the Congress."

Passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were certainly dangerous to the political careers of White Southern Democrats who rose to power and seniority on the backs of disenfranchised Black voters. They ascended to power by blocking African-American access to the polls and fighting for what Jesse Helms lov-



Jesse Helms was laid to rest this week.

ingly called "the Southern way of life." Translation: White supremacy.

Helms sought to frame his opposition to civil rights in another context.

"I felt that the citizens of my community, my state and my region of the country were being battered by this new form of bigotry. I simply could not stay silent in the face of this assault - and I didn't."

Senator No, as he was called for his obstructionist tactics, got it backward. It was African-Americans who were battered, pulverized by violence, retaliation, bogus literacy tests, poll taxes and racists such as Helms.

When Helms retired from the Senate, Washington Post columnist David S. Broder called him, "The last prominent unabashed white racist politician in the country."

Helm's record reflected just that.

He blocked the nomination of federal judges with whom he disagreed, held up funds to the United Nations as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, conducted a 16-day filibuster against establishing the Martin Luther King federal holiday, opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, voted against the Voting Rights Act of 1965, railed against AIDS as a gay disease (he later softened his view on AIDS) and in 1990 boycotted Nelson Mandela's address to a joint session of Congress.

Even other Southern segregationists moderated their views over time. South Carolina's Strom Thurmond, for example, admitted that his past positions on race had been wrong and became the first Southern Congressman to add an African-American to

his staff. After his famous "Stand in the Schoolhouse Door" at the University of Alabama, Gov. George C. Wallace asked Black voters for forgiveness and made a direct appeal to Black voters.

Over the years, Helms moved in the opposite direction.


In 1966, he mailed 125,000 fliers to heavily Black districts in North Carolina saying African-Americans would be imprisoned if they voted. When challenged by former Charlotte Mayor Harvey Gantt in 1990, the incumbent unveiled an overtly racist television ad. It showed the hand of a White man balling up a rejection letter as the announcer intoned, "You needed that job. And you were the best qualified. But they had to give it to a minority."

Helms won the election. As a native Southerner, I often think about how far the South would have advanced if it weren't for the likes of Jesse Helms. I think about all the talented people that migrated North in search of employment or a better education. I think about some brave Whites who stood up for fairness in my native Tuscaloosa, Ala., only to be socially ostracized or threatened with death. If Jesse Helms had his way, Blacks would still ride in the back of the bus, we would be barred from the polls and we wouldn't be able to live anywhere we could afford.

Seeing Barack Obama march through the South, including North Carolina, during the primaries reminded me that an openly racist Jesse Helms probably could not get elected in North Carolina today. And it is only fitting that Jesse Helms died knowing that a Black man has a credible chance of becoming the next U.S. president. That's in spite of Helms, not because of him.

George E. Curry, former editor-in-chief of Emergence magazine and the NNPA News Service, is a keynote speaker, moderator, and media coach. He can be reached through his Web site, www.georgecurry.com.

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Organized labor taking blacks for granted?



Marc Morial
Guest Columnist

There is no question the civil rights and labor movements have shared a public commitment to issues of parity and justice affecting African Americans and working people over the years. Forty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King embodied that partnership when he led his last march for justice in support of the striking sanitation workers of AFSCME Local 1733 in Memphis.

But, it is also true that the union movement has been slow to practice what it preaches when it comes to

equality within its own ranks.

In the early years of the labor movement, African Americans were systematically excluded from major unions, which led to the formation of separate Black labor unions. A. Philip Randolph founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925 and waged a 12-year fight to gain recognition by the American Federation of Labor. He went on to become a national leader in the fight against racism within unions, in the workplace and throughout America.

Those early barriers have slowly fallen and now Blacks represent about 14 percent of American union workers. But, at a time when African Americans are an increasingly important part of the organized labor's future, they are

still not adequately represented at the top echelons of the American labor leadership. But don't take my word for it.

Listen to what William Lucy, AFSCME Secretary-Treasurer and the highest ranking African American in American labor has to say. In remarks to a 2005 national summit on labor and diversity in Chicago, Lucy said that at a time when the vast majority of new union members are women and people of color, "a majority of people of color still encounter barriers to gaining leadership positions within their union and even where they have reached leadership positions, they face additional challenges."

Lucy recommends mentoring support, education, training, and other pro-active efforts to achieve opportunities and equality within the

union movement. The National Urban League agrees. Organized labor must not take African American support for granted.

As the presidential election of 2008 draws closer, the American labor movement is mobilizing to represent the interests of working people on issues like universal health care, the elimination of poverty and the right to organize. Let's hope they apply that same vigor to increasing diversity in union leadership and in the continued fight for equal opportunity throughout America.

As A. Philip Randolph reminded us, "Salvation for a race, nation or class must come from within."

Marc Morial is president and CEO of the National Urban League.

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