



'Call me a pragmatic experimentalist' — Morgan

by Vernon Loeb
Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — North Carolinians know where their senior senator stands. Jesse Helms is a conservative. Ask a question, and he will give a direct, unflinching, conservative answer.

But Democrat Robert Morgan, after his first year in the Senate, is somewhat of an enigma. He sees the FBI as a threat to America, but the CIA as a competent, well-disciplined organization.

He says he is aggravated by the press, yet calls it a necessity to American society. His rhetoric is filled with allusions to the common man, but our welfare system, he says, is wrong. He favors national health insurance, but feels a comprehensive plan is impossible.

"I think the first thing you ought to understand is that I am not a doctrinarian," Morgan said. "If you wanted to label me anything you'd probably call me a pragmatic experimentalist who's willing to try to find solutions."

Being pragmatic in Washington, however, was impossible for the freshman senator. The Senate moved faster than the N.C. Attorney General's office, Morgan's previous job. Washington was not Lillington, the small Harnett County town Morgan still calls home.

Last July, after seven months in the Senate, Morgan's initial enthusiasm was marred by frustration. "I'll be honest with you. So far I haven't enjoyed it," he said at the time. "There's no way I can keep up with what's going on in the Senate."

Five months later, at the end of his freshman year in December, he said his feelings of frustration had only increased.

Now, if the decision to seek reelection was at hand, Morgan said the answer would be no. "But being candid with you, I feel better about it today than I did a year ago and I hope that a year from now I'll feel even more so," he added.

Although frustrated, Morgan does not seem to be intimidated by the Senate. He

publicly labeled it an antiquated system, and told his senior colleagues exactly what he thought of their long standing traditions.

"For instance this morning I had Public Works and Banking (committee meetings) at the same time, and I believe I had Intelligence committee at the same time, and normally, you have the Senate meeting at the same time," Morgan said.

"This would have worked fine 200 years ago. But in this day and time we've got to update," the diminutive senator added before explaining that such frankness is his personal rule, not exception. "I think controversy is good. I hope that I will always be an outspoken person," he said.

There is perhaps no better place for an outspoken man than the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, more commonly known as the Church Committee. Press comes easy. After keeping a low profile when the committee investigated the CIA, Morgan's candid criticism of the FBI spread his name nationwide.

"I don't worry about the CIA. The CIA, with proper guidance and leadership from the administration and oversight from Congress, which it's going to get in the future, doesn't really constitute a threat to American liberty," he said. "But the FBI does when it decides in its own offices what organizations constitute a security threat."

Except for a brief stint under the Nixon Administration, Morgan said the CIA has limited its activities to foreign intelligence and acted only pursuant to higher authority. "It may be the security council, it might have been the president of the United States — they act in such a circumlocutory manner, that it's always difficult to say that the

president of the United States ordered this.

"But no person can read the 11,000 pages of testimony that we listened to, and come to any other conclusion, than that which says the CIA is a competent, well-disciplined intelligence organization," he said.

"With regard to the FBI, there are no clear lines to authority. Secondly, they're dealing with domestic intelligence. They're dealing with Americans and civil liberties of Americans," Morgan said. "Our constitution doesn't guarantee the civil liberties of the Congolese, or the Angolans or the Vietnamese. But it guarantees my right to be let alone."

"Why is it hard to get this across to people?" he asked. "Because normally they don't go out here and harass the Rotary clubs. They normally harass unpopular or controversial organizational organizations like the Panthers, klansmen, the Socialist Party, the Students for Democratic Society, the Baptist Student Foundation."

Such outspoken criticism during select committee hearings from Tar Heel representatives is nothing new. Morgan's predecessor, Sam Ervin, criticized the Nixon Administration to the hilt when he chaired the select committee on Watergate.

But this is where the visible similarities between Senator Sam and young Bobby end. In one sense, Morgan is still moving into Ervin's large office, which was once John Kennedy's Washington niche.

In another sense, Morgan has never left North Carolina. His family still lives in Lillington, because, Morgan said, he could not find an affordable house in the Washington area. So he goes home almost every weekend.

But the transition to the cosmopolitan capital was not a culture shock, he said. "I just don't feel the warmth of the people, and the people are not as warm and friendly and cordial as they are in North Carolina."

North Carolina is still "back home" for Morgan. "I don't believe there's any state in the Union in which people are guaranteed their freedom any more so and enjoy more privileges than they do in North Carolina." Often criticized for his frequent absences from the Senate floor, Morgan said, "I told the people back home when I was running that I wasn't coming up here to build a Sunday School attendance record."

There is a myth about the importance of voting records, he said. "There are some votes that you have to be here for, the other votes I think you could best use your time elsewhere," he added. "If you become a slave to the voting record, I don't think you can do justice to the people."

Morgan seemed glad to dispel this myth. He said his position on a bill is always announced if he is not present to vote. He said also that he often engaged in the practice

of vote pairing, in which he withdraws his vote in conjunction with an absent senator who held the opposing position.

"In the Senate records, that counts as a vote, but the *Congressional Quarterly*, which is a private magazine, doesn't count it," Morgan said of vote pairing.

The *Congressional Quarterly* is not the only arm of the fourth estate that aggravates Morgan. "The *New York Times*, as much of an in-depth paper as it is, could not possibly give more than 10 inches to a debate that took two days," Morgan said.

"Therefore you've got even at best a situation where you can get especially aggravated if the press, acting in good faith, fails to report your point of view."

"Then you have people like Novak and Evans, who no doubt are good reporters, but they have such a negative approach to everything — I don't talk to them. It's a scathing, bitter way of writing things," Morgan said.

"But by the same token, the advantages of a free and open press far outweigh the

irritations that we sometimes have from them," he added. "If President Nixon had been able to operate without being plagued by a probing press, we could have very well had a dictatorship in this country today."

But while he called the hawkish Novak and Evans bitter and negative, some say he stands on their ideological plane.

"I really don't know what a hawk is, but I am for a strong defense. We can never let our president operate from a position of weakness, and unfortunately we have reached a point in this country today where the quality of Russia's weapons exceed ours in all but two or three different fields," he said.

"They've got a million more men in uniform than we've got and they also think the American people lack the will to move," Morgan contends.

Although the pragmatic Morgan said he cannot be labeled politically, perhaps a fitting categorization would be a guardian of the American will.

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