Jesse Helms: The Most Important Senator of Our Times

by Phyllis Schlafly July 16, 2008

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Senator Jesse Helms, who like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died on the Fourth of July, was the authentic voice of conservatism for three decades. He was a role-model of an incorruptible public official who adhered to principle despite the pressures that surround those with political power, and he gave us a standard by which others can be measured.

Jesse Helms was elected five times as U.S. Senator from North Carolina, and all his races were hard-fought. He never ran away from the controversy that his conservatism engendered.

In 1976, conservatives were as depressed as they are today. Conservatives were so dissatisfied and angry about the Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford administrations that California Governor Ronald Reagan challenged the incumbent Ford, a daring decision because it's so seldom that an incumbent is defeated in his own party primary.

Reagan lost primary after primary and was destined to be just another wannabe presidential candidate until Jesse Helms seized the moment and changed politics forever. Helms took charge of the primary campaign in North Carolina and led Reagan to an upset victory that transformed him into a viable presidential candidate.

Even though Reagan lost the presidential nomination to Ford (by only 117 delegate votes), with hindsight we can see that the real importance of the 1976 Convention was the Platform. Although only a first-term Senator from a southern state, Helms decided that the Republican Platform should be the forum on which to rebuild the conservative movement that had badly eroded under Nixon, Ford, and their chief adviser, Henry Kissinger.

Helms urged the Delegates to adopt a strongly worded Platform that stood for principles Republicans could be proud of, such as military superiority "second to none," instead of Kissinger-style appeasement and retreat. Helms also called for an approach that was unthinkable to establishment Republicans: a direct attack on the policies of the incumbent Republican President.

Helms called his Platform "morality in foreign policy." It promised "a realistic assessment of the Communist challenge" and bluntly criticized any giveaway of the Panama Canal or unilateral concessions to the Soviet Union.

In an upset victory, the 1976 Convention adopted the Helms Platform repudiating the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger foreign policy of detente, and promising that we would "never tolerate a shift against us in the strategic balance." That was the moment when the Republican Party turned toward victory over the evil empire and laid the basis for Ronald Reagan's principled campaign four years later.

The 1976 Platform was not just about foreign policy; 1976 was the first Republican National Convention when the emerging pro-family movement raised its voice in politics. The 1976 Platform opposed "intrusion by the federal government" in education and called for constitutional amendments to restore prayer to schools and "to restore protection of the right to life for unborn children."

The 1976 Platform showed the country that the majority of Republicans disavowed the so-called moderates and liberals (those we now call RINOs -- Republicans In

Name Only) and were determined to rebuild the Republican Party on conservative principles.

After the 1976 Convention, Jesse Helms made his life's work the most important of all issues: foreign policy. A great Senator from a previous generation, Robert A. Taft (who is memorialized by a carillon tower on Capitol Hill), explained the importance of foreign policy like this: "We cannot clean up the mess in Washington, balance the budget, reduce taxes, check creeping Socialism, tell what is muscle and fat in our sprawling rearmament programs, purge subversives from our State Department, unless we come to grips with our foreign policy, upon which all other policies depend."

Jesse Helms became conservatism's conscience at the helm of U.S. foreign policy for the rest of his public life. During the Reagan years, Helms was the Senate leader in supporting our anti-Communist allies in other countries.

During the dismal Clinton years, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Helms was Horatio on the Bridge, valiantly defending America against the busybody international bureaucrats who want to curtail our sovereignty. Helms saw to it that most of the disastrous United Nations treaties never reached the Senate floor or were defeated, including the International Criminal Court Treaty, the UN Treaty on the Rights of the Child, the UN Treaty on Women, the UN Global Warming Treaty, and the UN Biodiversity Treaty.

Helms fought foreign aid to Communist countries, stopped extravagant handouts to the United Nations, and defeated Bill Clinton's worst diplomatic appointments.

We are told that no one is irreplaceable, but that may not be true in the case of Jesse Helms -- there isn't yet any other national leader like him. We will surely miss him every time a UN treaty or an undeserving nominee surfaces in the Senate.