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Helms, clearly

A biographer strives for a balanced view of a divisive figure

BY STEVE WEINBERG

Jesse Helms was perhaps the most divisive person in North Carolina from the time he served on the Raleigh City Council during the 1950s, through his development of a large audience as a media commentator during the 1960s, into his U.S. Senate service from 1973 to 2003, and even after his retirement.

Writing the life of such a divisive individual is a daunting task for any biographer who wants to be taken seriously. If the biographer is a political and social "conservative" already in tune with Helms, the book would be embraced by true believers and dismissed as biased by Helms' detractors. If the biographer is a political and social "liberal" already opposed to Helms, the book would be embraced and dismissed in a mirror-image manner.

William A. Link, a history professor at the University of Florida with strong, lifelong North Carolina ties, wants to be taken seriously as Helms' biographer. So, though residing in the "liberal" camp, Link made a conscious decision to write a balanced biography of Helms the ideologue from inside Helms' head, a daunting task. As a biographer, I find Link's self-imposed challenge fascinating. As for the result, well, it is mostly successful. But it is sometimes infuriating because of Link's determination to come across as relentlessly nonjudgmental.

Writing a Helms biography is not exactly like writing a balanced biography of Adolf Hitler or Josef Stalin. Still, Helms was a hater -- of blacks, gays, secular humanists and investigative reporters in general, as well as uppity women, government bureaucrats seeking peace throughout the world and artists who expressed themselves freely when representing sex or religion. Such hatred seems especially poignant given Helms' oft-expressed devotion to Christian principles and practices.

And yet, at junctures throughout the biography, the "good" Helms appears: He is the devoted companion of friends from childhood in Monroe; the loving husband; the caring father of children biological and adopted; the kindly employer, especially in the U.S. Senate where his staff members adored him; the paragon of constituent service as an elected official; the accomplished communicator who wisely experiments with television as a tool for politicians; the Southern gentleman who serves as a delightful dinner guest or host.

Near the beginning of the book, in a prologue titled "The Two Faces of Jesse Helms," Link wrestles with the good and bad versions. Some readers might consider the prologue judicious. Other readers might consider it wishy-washy. I consider it a noble but less than successful experiment by a biographer trying to accomplish what comes unnaturally.

An accomplished researcher, Link cannot be accused of ignoring controversy in Helms' life, no matter how equivocal Link comes across. The words "racist" and "racism" show up, for example.

According to Link, Helms took offense "by any suggestions that he was racist, and he often pointed to his record of employing African Americans while he was at WRAL, which he once described as

'perhaps one of the most integrated television stations in the country.' According to Helms, in the 1940s he hired North Carolina's first black radio announcer ... Jesse also liked to point out that he was one of the best-liked senators among the mostly black custodial staff on Capitol Hill." Fair enough. But what does it say about Helms that he considered himself nonracist despite his opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, to school busing, to his belief in white supremacy? Link never grapples satisfyingly with the conundrum. Maybe that is something no biographer could grapple with satisfyingly.

Despite the ambiguities about Helms himself, Link is a clear writer. Even the clarity cannot prevent the lengthy book from seeming tedious at times, because Link repeats the themes of Helms' career beyond reason. (As the book's editor, I probably would have cut 50 pages simply by eliminating such repetition.) It is also irritating that Link never decides whether to refer to his subject as "Jesse" or "Helms." The first-name only/last-name only switchbacks seem to appear with no special significance in mind.

There are plenty of reasons to praise Link, especially considering the goal he set for himself. He mines the media skillfully for research purposes, and in that context it seems incumbent to disclose that Link mentions The News & Observer frequently --partly because it makes sense to quote the newspaper's massive coverage of Helms, partly because Helms frequently castigated the newspaper in general, as well as some of its individual reporters and editors. Link terms The News & Observer Helms' "most consistent critic."

Link provides context for Helms' career about as well as a biographer can. One of the most important contextual passages explains why the biography is recommended for any North Carolinian: "An architect of the emergence of the American right, Helms served as an uncompromising ideologue who helped both to assemble a rhetorical message with wide appeal to ordinary Americans and to fashion a strategy to obtain political power. A majority of North Carolina voters admired Helms' tenacity, and they elected him to the Senate five times ... In the end, the conservative movement was wrapped up in Helms' career, and his life charts the emergence of modern American conservatism."

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