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A lion on the right

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By W. James Antle III - Early in the 1976 race for the Republican presidential nomination, Ronald Reagan was reeling. The former governor of California had lost the first five primaries to Gerald Ford and had come to North Carolina to make his last stand. That's when Sen. Jesse Helms came to his aid, blasting the Ford administration for its support of the Panama Canal Treaty.

Mr. Reagan won the North Carolina primary and began an impressive streak of victories. Although he did not capture the nomination that year, Mr. Helms and the Tarheel State saved his political career. In 1984, Mr. Reagan would return the favor as his coattails dragged Mr. Helms across the finish line in his closest Senate race.

The connection didn't end there. Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms were arguably the two most important conservative elected officials of their era. Together, they represented the two faces of the American right — one sunny and optimistic, the other angrily defiant of liberal rivals. Mr. Helms represented the latter, a side of conservatism today's Republicans are often reluctant to showcase.

Both Mr. Helms' role in the conservative ascendancy and the more troubling aspects of his legacy are probed in historian William A. Link's massive book, "Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism." Mr. Link is no conservative and the Jesse Helms Center panned the book for "falling victim . . . to the liberal bias of the author." Yet "Righteous Warrior" does at least attempt a fair portrayal.

Through his Congressional Club, Mr. Helms employed direct mail and a whole host of new media techniques to expand North Carolina's Republican Party and the national conservative movement. The pioneering political operation used scathing indictments of liberals and tartly worded appeals to mobilize evangelical Christians and push the party to the right on a wide array of economic, social and foreign policy issues.

A fervent anti-communist, Mr. Helms helped move the Republican Party beyond detente in the Cold War and managed to bring dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn to the United States over the objections of then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. He was instrumental in the adoption of the Republican Party's first unequivocal pro-life platform plank.

He was a tireless whistleblower against government waste and federal subsidies to artists who mocked traditional values. Mr. Helms also carefully scrutinized foreign-aid expenditures and was a blunt critic of the United Nations.

Yet not every political cause Mr. Helms championed was so noble. For decades after beginning his public life as a newspaperman in the 1940s, he was a staunch defender of racial segregation. Although he was not as incendiary as Lester Maddox or George Wallace at their worst, his attack on the University of North Carolina as "the University of Negroes and Communists" was an example of his slash-and-burn reactionary rhetoric.

Mr. Helms continued to obsess over racial issues long after such contemporaries as Strom Thurmond moderated, culminating in racially tinged battles with black Sen. Carol Moseley Braun. "I'm going to sing 'Dixie' until she cries," Mr. Helms reportedly said.

"Righteous Warrior" does not downplay Mr. Helms' moral blind spot on race, though the author could have better acknowledged legitimate objections to affirmative action and forced busing on policy grounds. Helms fans will find Mr. Link's focus on race excessive, liberal critics will find the author too diplomatic.

Mr. Helms later displayed mean-spiritedness in his comments about AIDS and homosexuality. Despite his stouthearted defense of freedom against Soviet tyranny, Mr. Helms often turned a blind eye to right-wing authoritarians. While Mr. Reagan was a happy warrior, Mr. Helms was often portrayed as Capitol Hill's Archie Bunker.

Mr. Link does not ignore the numerous personal anecdotes that counter this image, recounting numerous stories of his personal kindness toward his constituents, staffers and colleagues. He also covers Mr. Helms' shift on AIDS and work with the rock star Bono to alleviate poverty in Africa. But the author could have injected more color and personality into accounts of dramatic races against Jim Hunt and Harvey Gantt. The book is slow and doesn't capture its subject's personality.

Nevertheless, "Righteous Warrior" is an ambitious, well-researched work that will probably be the definitive take on Jesse Helms for some time. Although the 86-year-old five-term senator is now retired and living in a convalescent center, he has left an indelible mark on his party and the conservative movement. One needn't ignore Mr. Helms' many good works, however, to understand why Republicans prefer to be branded as Mr. Reagan's party instead.

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