

# Helms never changed civil rights opposition

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) - Jesse Helms forever changed North Carolina politics and the conservative movement. The former senator did it without ever changing much about himself.

There is perhaps no better example of Helms' unwavering commitment to his beliefs than on the issue of race. Helms was a staunch opponent of the nation's civil rights movement, where he joined the likes of Alabama Gov. George Wallace and South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond in a fight to keep outsiders from meddling in what he called "the Southern way of life."

But those two giants of Southern politics would come to temper their views on race and civil rights, while Helms never did. He died Friday at age 86, having

never seen any need to apologize or deviate from his views.

"I can't think of many other examples of major opponents of the civil rights movement that didn't modify their view on civil rights," said William Link, a professor at the University of Florida and a Helms biographer. "He was very much a man of the times and his generation... of North Carolina Whites [who] grew up with segregation."

Helms' take-no-prisoners brand of politics, combined with a strict stubbornness on social issues and a fiery desire to defeat Communism, endeared him to conservatives. His defiance of the establishment, combined with a political machine that refined the art of direct-mail fundraising, helped Helms

transform North Carolina into a two-party state and turn the South into a Republican stronghold.

His greatest political accomplishment came in a year when his name didn't even appear on the ballot. Helms' decision to back Ronald Reagan's upstart bid against President Gerald Ford in 1976 led the struggling California governor to an upset win in the North Carolina primary, setting the stage for his eventual White House win four years later.

"In one sense, the role that Jesse played in that one primary 32 years ago was key to electing a president — which was key to Reagan, which was key to America winning the Cold War," said Carter Wrenn, a longtime political operative in the Helms machine.

Throughout his five terms in the Senate, Helms took offense at accusations he was racist. He spoke often of his good relationships with Blacks and pointed to the Black members on his staff.

He insisted he opposed the Civil Rights Act because he didn't want the federal government intervening in state matters. He considered the civil rights movement to be either corrupt or self-serving, Link said.

"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," Helms wrote in his 2005 memoir, "Here's Where I Stand." "I simply could not stay silent in the face of this assault —

and I didn't."

For years, he was joined in that fight by Thurmond, Wallace and others. They entered politics a little earlier than Helms, but each professed the same commitment to states rights as the Jim Crow-era of segregation slowly succumbed to court decisions, legislation and changing attitudes about race in the South.

But time and political expediency mellowed their views. After an attempted (See Helms, Page 3)

## NAACP

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Mike Allen, the Hamilton County prosecutor at the time and a former police officer, once called Smitherman a "smart-mouthed little punk."

"That's one I wished I had back," said Allen, now in private law practice. "About two years ago, I saw him on the street downtown, and I apologized. I have been following what's he's doing, and although I do not agree with everything he does, he's a fine young man."

Smitherman calls himself a political independent and fiscal conservative molded by his dad, a chemist with Procter & Gamble, and his mother, a teacher and administrator in Cincinnati Public Schools. He has established a business as a financial adviser and estate planner.

"I don't define myself as a rabble-rouser," he said. "I grew up in an upper-middle class family; I am upper-middle class. I'm very proud of that success. I've built this business from scratch, and it's been able to take care of my family. My financial independence allows me to be independent politically."

Smitherman knew some people had doubts about where he would take the local NAACP, but he believes he has allayed fears that he was only interested in bombast and boycotts.

"I'm not just an attack dog," he said. "My time is spent on the phone negotiating with people, explaining our position."

Longtime activist Marian Spencer, 88, is a sometime

ally. Like Smitherman, she was president of the local NAACP and a member of City Council, both in the 1980s, and supported him in his takeover of the chapter.

"He was absolutely right in the concerns he had," Spencer said.

"I differed with him on the jail tax issue. We do not agree on everything. I've found him exceedingly capable, personable, though not always in the same place I am with the issues — and he doesn't have to be."



Longtime local resident Heticine Taylor passed away on July 1, 2008. Services will be held this Saturday, July 12, at noon at Palms Mortuary on 1325 N. Main St.

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