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Good Riddance to a Bad Senator

BY GREG D. KUBIAK

Three words never sounded so sweet. "Helms is retiring."

But unfortunately, his legacy of hatefulness lives on the Senate where he serves, and among the backward constituencies around the nation for whom he has spoken.

Even though his term in the Senate will not end until January 2003, the departure of Senator Jesse Helms (R-North Carolina) reads like a dark political obituary. Considering the pox he's been to the minority and Gay communities for the last twenty years, the end of his reign of terror can't come too soon.

In 1979, he co-sponsored the so-called "Family Protection Act" that would have banned federal funding to any program that presents "homosexuality, male or female, as an acceptable alternative lifestyle or suggests that it can be an acceptable lifestyle."

In his 1984 campaign, in the most expensive U.S. Senate election to that time, he wrote the playbook on how to use the gay issue against your opponent. He accused his Democratic rival, Governor Jim Hunt, of being a puppet of special interests including "militant homosexuals." This strategy is being used by Republicans in a "Virginia, not Vermont" anti-gay effort in that state's gubernatorial race this year.

Helms used that next six years to nationalize his bigotry by leading efforts against gay rights, persons with HIV and AIDS, and funding for the arts. Barely an issue came by that "Senator No", as he became known, did not find a way to stigmatize the nation against Gays. In the next decade, he

turned his energy more personal, by leading efforts against Roberta Achtenberg, the first openly lesbian federal official to be confirmed by the Senate. He was also instrumental in President Clinton's backing away from the nomination of James Hormel as ambassador to the Fiji Islands in 1994, (though his nomination to be ambassador to Luxembourg proceeded a few years later.)

Helms' latest victory came earlier this year when the Senate narrowly passed an amendment that would withhold federal funds for any public school that denies access to meeting space for local Boy Scout troops. The jury's still out on that one.

While the Gay community has felt the sting of Helms' harsh rhetoric, his prejudice against minorities is renowned. In 1983, he led the filibuster against the Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday. Years later, he got into a shouting match with African-American Senator Carol Mosley Braun over the Congressional charter for the Daughters of the Confederate Revolution. In between, he was public enemy number one of affirmative action programs.

Washington Post columnist David Broder recently wrote of Helms' legacy as well. "What is unique about Helms - and from my viewpoint, unforgivable - is his willingness to pick at the scab of the great wound of American history, the legacy of slavery and segregation, and to inflame racial resentment against African Americans."

Others in the national press have been lax in describing the real Jesse, as though he's already gone. Perhaps the footage of him needing to use a walker or

motorized cart to get around the Capitol has made softies of what Helms would describe as the "liberal press."

Without a doubt, his resume of hatred is a long read. But what distinguishes this aging politician is that no signs of self-redemption are on the horizon. Consider the way George Wallace, an avowed segregationist in the South, sought to bring healing to the hate-filled scars on his career. Although soon before his death, Wallace recanted the years of bigotry he sewed as governor of Alabama and a 1972 Presidential contender. It was an act that brought some solace to those whom he hurt for decades. And remember what President Clinton said at the funeral of Richard Nixon in 1994? Clinton reminded mourners that despite Nixon's resigning in the disgrace of Watergate, the ex-President should be judged on the totality of his life and service, which included many progressive domestic programs, opening the doors to communist China, and efforts to give leaders the value of his good experience in geopolitical affairs after he left office.

Unless he starts soon to rehabilitate his reputation, Helms unlike Wallace and Nixon, will always be remembered as a racist and a homophobe. Make no doubt about it, the Senate will be losing a bad man when Helms casts his last vote. And we can all just sign, good riddance.

Greg D. Kubiak, author, activist, and public policy analyst writes "In Our Interest" for several Gay publications. The Vice Versa Award winner can be reached via this publication or by e-mail, GKubiak@aol.com.



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