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Jesse Helms, John McCain and the Mark of the White Hands

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Jesse Helms was a segregationist, and a nasty one at that.

Long after his contemporaries abandoned old "Jim Crow," Helms kept playing the race card when it served him politically. And when he was not picking on African-Americans, he picked on ethnic minorities, immigrants, trade unionists and gays and lesbians.

While Helms served thirty years in the Senate, his tenure on Capitol Hill was never so historically significant as his crude pursuit of power and the unsettling lengths to which he went to retain it. "He'll be remembered, in part, for the strong racist streak that articulated his politics and almost all of his political campaigns - "they were racialized in the most negative ways," recalled Kerry Haynie, a political science professor at Duke University.

Helms' death Friday, at age 86, brings America a small step closer to the end of the post-antebellum era in our politics that saw the men who had battled to deny the franchise to millions of Americans because of the color of their skin -- and who fought even more aggressively to deny adequate education, nutrition and health care to African-American children -- make the easy transition to leadership positions in the "modern" Republican Party.

Helms was not always a Republican. As a young man of the Old South, he had no interest in joining an organization that, well into the 20th century, proudly referred to itself as "the party of Lincoln."

Only when the Grand Old Party adopted a southern accent and replaced references to the Great Emancipator with grumping about "racial quotas" did Helms make the switch to the party of Ronald Reagan, George Bush and John McCain. He brought along the symbols and sounds of the "Jim Crow" Democrats, insisting that Republican events celebrate the memory of Robert E. Lee and encouraging the singing of "Dixie" at party rallies.

Helms was not just any Republican, however. He was an essential player in the remaking of the party. With his National Congressional Club, a money-raising machine that helped forge what came to be called "the New Right" within the GOP, Helms aide Carter Wrenn says the senator forced "the realignment of the Republican party."

"You can't really separate the growth of the Republican party from Jesse's career," explained Wrenn.

The wily Richard Nixon was one of the first Republicans to recognize Helms' utility.

The North Carolinian was welcomed into the GOP by then President Nixon and his southern strategists of the late 1960s and early 1970s because they understood that Helms was skilled at working the fault lines that could turn white fears into Republican votes.

The Republicans are still working those fault-lines. Indeed, some of the people who worked most closely with Helms as he transformed what began as an anti-slavery party into a comfortable retreat for white-backlash voters are now key players in the campaign of John McCain, the presumptive Republican nominee for president.

"Let us remember a life dedicated to serving this nation," McCain declared in a statement on the death of Helms, to whom he was compared favorably by former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole earlier this year. (Actually, Dole suggested that McCain was somewhat more conservative than Helms.)

Those who battled hardest against Helms and his racial politics are quite certain that the 2008 campaign of Republican McCain against Democrat Barack Obama, who in August will become the first African-American nominee of a major party for president, will take a Helmsian turn.

"There's no question appeals will be made by McCain's campaign on racial lines," says North Carolina Congressman Mel Watt, who felt the full brunt of that racial politics when he managed the campaign of Harvey Gantt, an African-American Democrat who challenged Helms in 1990 and 1996.

Jesse Alexander Helms Jr. got his start in national politics as a campaign strategist for Willis Smith, who mounted a race-baiting challenge to U.S. Senator Frank Porter Graham in the 1950 North Carolina Democratic primary.

Graham, a former president of the University of North Carolina, served in the Senate as a national Democrat, who supported President Harry Truman and accepted the party's emerging commitment to civil rights.

Smith, who was backed by the segregationist dead-enders that had supported the 1948 States' Rights Party ("Dixiecrat") campaign of segregationist Strom Thurmond, hired Helms to help him win by exploiting racist sentiment in the state.

One advertisement that Helms and his team created screamed: "White people, wake up before it is too late. Do you want Negroes working beside you, your wife and your daughters, in your mills and factories? Frank Graham favors mingling of the races."

Another advertisement allegedly worked up by Helms highlighted a doctored photograph that purported to illustrate the penchant of Graham's wife for dancing with African-American men.

The Smith campaign was called "the most overtly racist campaign since the turn of the century," according to the Raleigh News & Observer, a publication for which Helms once worked.

Unfortunately, it was also successful -- a lesson that was not lost on the 29-year-old Helms.

Smith beat Graham, won the general election, went to Washington and brought the campaign along as his administrative assistant.

But Helms was soon back in North Carolina, encouraging massive resistance to integration, as a Raleigh city councilman and a television commentator who referred to the University of North Carolina as the "University of Negroes and Communists" and suggested that walls be erected around the UNC campus to prevent enlightened thinking from "infecting" the rest of North Carolina.

Though he was genteel in person -- so much so that this reporter would sometimes describe him favorably when compared to less gracious members of the Senate -- Helms went wide-eyed and brutal when the cameras went on.

Helms warned that, "Crime rates and irresponsibility among Negroes are a fact of life which must be faced."

He suggested that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was a communist dupe and refused, even decades after King's death, to honor the Nobel Peace Prize winner.

He dismissed the civil rights movement as a cabal of communists and "moral degenerates."

As the movement gathered strength -- and as murderous violence against activists in particular and African-Americans in general increased -- Helms menacingly suggested to non-violent civil rights activists that, "The Negro cannot count forever on the kind of restraint that's thus far left him free to clog the streets, disrupt traffic, and interfere with other men's rights."

When his fellow Democrats began to reject his brand of race-baiting politics in a series of primaries that saw moderates such as former North Carolina Governor Terry Sanford beat segregationists, Helms followed Thurmond into the Republican Party.

In 1972, he determined to follow Thurmond into the Senate.

Helms got a couple of lucky political breaks. First, President Nixon was running his "southern strategy" reelection campaign to attract segregationist Democrats to the GOP. Second, the Democratic nominee for the Senate that year was North Carolina Congressman Nick Galifianakis.

Galifianakis was a Greek-American, which to Helms and his supporters meant the congressman was a bit too "ethnic" to represent North Carolina. The newly-minted Republican, who could always be counted on to exploit any difference that might benefit his candidacy, campaigned on the slogan: "Vote for Helms --- He's One of Us!"

That was mild compared with the 1990 and 1996 campaigns Helms ran against Gantt, the former Charlotte mayor who was the first African-American to compete seriously for a southern Senate seat in the modern era.

In 1990, after Helms fell behind in the race, his campaign began running television advertisements that showed a white man's hands crumpling up a rejection notice from a corporation that had refused to hire him because affirmative action policies had supposedly required that the job go to a "less qualified minority." After those words were uttered, an image of Gantt flashed on the screen.

Helms won a narrow victory that year, as he did in 1996.

Helms did not leave his sentiments on the campaign trail.

Unlike George Wallace and a number of other southern pols, who made racist noises at election time but then quietly funded roads, schools and other projects in African-American communities, the former North Carolina senator's hometown newspaper noted delicately in an obituary that, "Although Helms denied he was a racist, his work in the Senate seemed at odds with the interests of blacks."

In addition to waging a filibuster in an attempt to block the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday, Helms opposed extension of the Voting Rights Act and championed the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Even as he rose in stature in the Senate, where he eventually served as chair of the powerful Foreign Relations Committee, Helms remained the son of the south that he had always been.

When Carol Moseley-Braun of Illinois became the first African-American woman to sit in the Senate, Helms followed Moseley-Braun into an elevator, announcing to Utah Senator Orrin Hatch: "Watch me make her cry. I'm going to make her cry. I'm going to sing 'Dixie' until she cries."

Then, emphasizing the lines about how "good" things were before the Civil War ended slavery, Helms sang "Dixie."

In one way or another, that's all he ever did. As the Rev. Jesse Jackson recalled, "At the height of his power, he fought for the values of the old confederacy. He resisted the new South. He resisted the opportunity to fight for a more perfect union."

Despite the best efforts of the senator and his spin doctors to rehabilitate the old man by hiring a few conservative staffers who happened to be people of color or by posing him for pictures with U2's Bono, Helms finished his career without the apologies that came from George Wallace, Orval Faubus and his fellow segregationists.

Even Strom Thurmond admitted his defenses of segregation were wrong, but not Helms. Nor did the North Carolinian ever make serious efforts to appeal to African-American voters -- as Wallace, Thurmond and "Jim Crow" politicians began to do late in their careers.

"He was sort of unrepentant until the end," said Duke's Kerry Haynie.

A biographer of Helms, Ernest Furgurson, put it more bluntly when he wrote: "All his public life, (Helms) has done and said things offensive to blacks, and to anyone sensitive to racial nuance."

Jesse Helms may have started as a Democrat and finished as a Republican. But he always

sang "Dixie."

And those who sang it with him are now working for John McCain.Alex Castellanos, the veteran Republican media consultant who produced the so-called "White Hands" commercial that Helms used against Gantt, has according to the Washington Post been advising McCain's campaign on media strategy.

Castellanos bluntly refers to his work with Helms as "The Cause." And That cause has attracted other key players from the late senator's campaigns.

Republican strategist Charlie Black, perhaps the most prominent member of McCain's political inner circle (especially since he suggested that a terrorist attack on the U.S. would benefit the Republican's prospects this fall), advised Helms throughout much of the senator's career and played a particularly central role in the 1990 campaign, according to contemporary media accounts.

When the "White Hands" ad stirred a national controversy, Black appeared on the PBS's Newshour to defend it. Democratic National Committee chairman Ron Brown, who was also on the show, said to Black: "You are a principal adviser of Jesse Helms. Would you advise him to run that kind of ad, Charlie? Do you approve of that ad, Charlie?"

Black replied, "I advised Jesse Helms to do what he's always done."

The question now is whether Black will advise McCain, another Republican who is trailing an attractive African-American Democrat, to do what Helms always did?

The answer is: Not exactly.

McCain's presidential campaign will not be a precise homage to Helms.

Black and his fellow strategists will undoubtedly be a bit subtler.

But Mel Watt suggested in a recent interview that we might still hear the faint strains of "Dixie."

"Clearly, times have changed, and people aren't going to be able to get away with those kind of direct racial appeals," said Watt recalling the 1990 anti-Gantt campaigning by Helms and his associates. "But they will make them more subtle, and call them something else. They'll call them economic appeals, like they did with the 'White Hands' ad."