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“Good News?” Asks CBS’s Gumbel, as Networks Stress Retiring Senator’s Opposition to Liberal Causes

Unbiased? Media Never Hid Helms Hatred

In his online “Media Notes” column this morning, the *Washington Post*’s Howard Kurtz predicted the media would respond to the retirement of Senator Jesse Helms with hypocrisy: “We will now go through one of those gooey Washington rituals where all the people who despised Jesse Helms will wipe away a tear and tell us what a statesman he was. The gag factor will be high.”

But the networks’ top stars hate the conservative Helms too much to go all gooey now. Talking to *Hotline*’s Craig Crawford on today’s *Early Show*, CBS’s Bryant Gumbel exhibited his disdain: “Helms is, let me pick my words here, an unapologetic right-wing conservative, I guess we could say. Is his departure good news for all but hard-right Republicans?”

Last night’s stories on ABC, CBS, and NBC ignored Helms’s achievements and stressed his opposition to pet liberal causes. According to CBS’s Bob Orr, “Helms has championed his own unbending agenda, earning the nickname ‘Senator No.’ He fought the Panama Canal treaties and has opposed abortion rights, AIDS funding, and even the Martin Luther King holiday. His opponents have accused him of using race to win elections.”

NBC’s Lisa Myers echoed that “for almost 30 years, he’s been known as ‘Senator No’ because of his willingness to fight everything — from civil rights bills to help for AIDS patients. That makes him a hero to many conservatives and a favorite bogeyman of liberals with whom he so loves to do battle.” ABC’s Claire Shipman stated, “On racial issues, he was a lightning rod, unrepentant about his support for American segregation, firmly opposed a Martin Luther King Day as a national holiday.”

Last night, the broadcast networks didn’t utter a single word about Senator Helms’s positive agenda, which included his championing of a balanced budget, his efforts to improve lives by letting people keep more of their own money or his battles to support policies to free people from the tyranny of communism. But this morning, *Newsweek*’s

Howard Fineman admitted that Helms deserved credit for standing against the Soviet Union’s forays into Central America during the 1980s. “It’s possible that both Nicaragua and El Salvador would be sort of relic communist regimes were it not for his staunch opposition to them,” he informed *Today* co-host Matt Lauer.

The media have been contemptuous of Helms for years. On Election Night 1990, NBC’s Andrea Mitchell called his re-election “heart-breaking.” She continued her condemnatory coverage the next day: “In victory, Jesse Helms was no more gracious than he had been during his slashing campaign,” she began her report for *NBC News at Sunrise*. When the

Republicans won the Senate in 1994, Gumbel, then with NBC, wasn’t trying to be ironic when he alleged that “a long line of outrageous remarks...have earned Helms the disrespect and disgust of people from coast to coast.”

On ABC’s *This Week* in 1997, Sam Donaldson lambasted Helms for daring to block the appointment of

liberal Republican William Weld as Ambassador to Mexico: “At receptions...he’s the most gentlemanly, courtly, friendly, pleasant individual you would ever hope to meet. But, when you see him in action, you see beneath that courtliness beats the heart of a dictator and I think the country is appalled.” Not a dictator, George Stephanopoulos helpfully interjected, but “a terrorist. The President is really... negotiating with a terrorist here.”

Reporters have lamely applauded Helms for sticking to “his convictions,” but their decades of brazen criticism reveals their hostility to his conservative views, and makes laughable any pretense that they’ve covered either his convictions or his career in a neutral fashion. — *Brent Baker and Rich Noyes*

Nina Totenberg, Queen of the Helms-Haters

“I think he ought to be worried about what’s going on in the Good Lord’s mind, because if there is retributive justice, he’ll get AIDS from a transfusion, or one of his grandchildren will get it.” — *National Public Radio and ABC reporter Nina Totenberg reacting to Senator Helms’ claim that the government spends too much on AIDS research, July 8, 1995 Inside Washington.*

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