

New York Times  
March 26, 2002

## Helms Reverses Opposition to Help on AIDS

By ADAM CLYMER

As he ends a 30-year Senate career, Jesse Helms has changed his mind about AIDS and has started to push for much more federal spending on the problem around the world.

In an op-ed article in The Washington Post on Sunday, Mr. Helms wrote that his conscience was "answerable to God" and said, "Perhaps, in my 81st year, I am too mindful of soon meeting Him." So he called for putting \$500 million in the pending \$27 billion supplemental appropriations bills to focus on eliminating mother-to-child transmission of the AIDS virus in Africa.

"I know of no more heartbreaking tragedy in the world today," the senator wrote, "than the loss of so many young people to a virus that could be stopped if we simply provided more resources."

Mr. Helms has frequently denounced foreign aid as a "rathole" and has frequently voted against aid appropriation bills. He has attributed his change of opinion to Bono, the star of the rock group U2 who has pushed for more federal spending to fight AIDS, and the Rev. Franklin Graham, who heads an organization known as Samaritan's Purse and is deeply involved with Africa.

But while Mr. Helms, a conservative standard-bearer, has changed his mind, it is only about the international aspect of the AIDS problem. He has made it clear in recent weeks to reporters in his home state, North Carolina, that his concerns do not extend to AIDS in the United States.

On March 5, he said that the "homosexual lifestyle" was the cause of the spread of AIDS in this country, and that spending on AIDS research took necessary money away from more worthy areas of study like "heart problems and other medical defects of humanity."

That distinction has drawn sharp criticism in North

Carolina from advocacy groups for people with AIDS. Today, Bill Brent, executive director of the Alliance of AIDS Services-Carolina, said his group agreed with Mr. Helms's proposals but thought it was "a shame he has taken two decades to come to this conclusion, only now as he is leaving office."

Mr. Brent added, "Any funding proposed by Senator Helms is a welcome sign that on some level he at last recognizes that this disease affects everyone."

"Perhaps one day," he said, Mr. Helms will want to fight the disease "here at home as well."

The White House had no comment on Mr. Helms's proposal. With Congress dispersed for its spring vacation, there was little reaction from Capitol Hill, except from a co-sponsor of the proposal, Senator Bill Frist, Republican of Tennessee.

"Thanks to the leadership of Senator Helms," Dr. Frist said, "we can increase the U.S. government's commitment to eradicating this deadly disease."

While aides to senators who have been pressing the Bush administration for much greater global AIDS spending were skeptical about some elements of Mr. Helms's proposal, they agreed that his support would make it easier to allot more money.

One unusual element of the plan is that before the \$500 million could be spent, it would have to be matched dollar for dollar by private donations. While some foreign aid programs are conditioned on private aid, they do not seek a match as high as dollar for dollar.

Mr. Helms's proposal emphasized "making treatment available for every H.I.V.-positive pregnant woman" so mother-to-child transmission of the virus that causes AIDS could be eliminated or nearly eliminated. Aides to senators who have been involved in the issue for some years suggested that while more spending in this area was needed, \$500 million was too much and some of the money could be spent more productively on training medical providers and on education.

But Mr. Helms, who is retiring at the end of his current term, in January 2003, wrote that if the Bush administration preferred simply to turn the money over

to the United Nations Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, that would be acceptable.

Mr. Helms's article on Sunday was a concrete follow-up to a remarkable statement he made on Feb. 20, when he told a conference held by Mr. Graham's organization, "I have been too lax too long in doing something really significant about AIDS."

He said he was "so ashamed that I have done so little."