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Media obituaries expose political bias

September 02, 2008 ¦ Brian Fitzpatrick

Photo caption: Former U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms, who died July 4 at age 86, was a staunch ally and friend of the late Dr. Jerry Falwell throughout the Moral Majority years. In 2004, LU separated its schools of business and government and decided to name the latter the Helms School of Government in honor of the right-wing champion.

One fundamental standard of civility in our society is to speak of the dead with a certain degree of respect. The liberal media deny this basic courtesy all too frequently when public figures die, especially those who took strong conservative stands in the culture wars.

For example, stalwart conservative Sen. Jesse Helms, who died July 4, was condemned by The New York Times: “[His] courtly manner and mossy drawl barely masked a hard-edged conservatism that opposed civil rights, gay rights, foreign aid and modern art.” The Washington Post attacked his “divisiveness.” NBC called him an “ultra-rightist.”

When the Rev. Jerry Falwell, founder of the socially conservative Moral Majority, died last year, the media were far nastier. One CBS analyst dismissed Falwell as “comedy fodder,” and several network reports demeaned him by dwelling on a handful of controversial incidents in his career. Two different CNN shows played a horrifying statement by former President Jimmy Carter: “Well, in a very Christian way, as far as I’m concerned, he can go to hell.”

The media were much kinder to Tony Snow, the conservative pundit and White House press secretary who died July 12. The New York Times rightly credited Snow with helping to “reinvigorate” the White House press operation, and passed along laudatory remarks about Snow from President Bush. The Associated Press praised his good looks and quick wit. The

Washington Post obituary was often critical and sometimes snide, but the Post acknowledged Snow's compelling performance as a press secretary and his courage in fighting cancer.

So why did the media treat Snow so much more respectfully than Helms and Falwell? Tony Snow, a fellow journalist, was widely acknowledged in media circles to be a kind and friendly man. If Helms and Falwell had been monsters, the disrespectful media treatment would at least be understandable. But the truth is that both men were, on a personal level, as kind and charming as Tony Snow.

Jerry Falwell was a genial teddy bear of a man, adored by his students at Liberty University and well liked and trusted even by supposed "enemies" like porn impresario Larry Flynt. Jesse Helms was the embodiment of a Southern gentleman, courtly and gracious. Several years ago a former roommate of mine, a doctrinaire liberal, bought a house just a few steps away from Helms's home outside of Washington, D.C.

My friend told me later that he'd never have bought the house had he known Helms would be his neighbor — but once he got to know Helms, he was profoundly impressed by his kindness and character.

The real difference between Helms and Falwell, on one hand, and Tony Snow on the other was their contrasting roles in the culture war. Helms and Falwell were dynamic leaders and shrewd political strategists who capably advanced social conservative values and frustrated liberal causes. Tony Snow was a first-rate journalist and an articulate conservative who favored traditional values, but he was not a culture warrior who aggressively challenged the Left's social agenda. Helms's and Falwell's real "crime" was their effective advocacy of values despised by the liberal media.

Ultimately the disparity in coverage says more about the media than about Helms, Falwell and Snow. Politics, to many on the left, is a civic religion, and anybody espousing the wrong values is viewed as malicious if not downright evil.

The abuse of Helms and Falwell betrays the liberal media's ideological bias. On the bright side, their overall fair and respectful treatment of Tony Snow was a breath of fresh air to news watchers accustomed to savage attacks on public figures perceived as out of step with liberalism.

Brian Fitzpatrick is Senior Editor, Culture and Media Institute. He is the author of "Tempting Target: Media Try to Persuade Conservatives to Stay Home," for Human Events Online. Rush Limbaugh cited the column on Oct. 23, 2006, giving CMI immediate notoriety. Fitzpatrick has a B.A. in Government from Dartmouth College, and a Biblical Studies Certificate from Capital Bible Seminary.