

national news

Jesse Helms runs amok

Helms and Sen. Bob Smith use the Senate floor as a stage for their political gay-bashing

by Martha Allen



Jesse Helms

The U.S. Senate voted Aug. 1 to cut off federal funds to any school district offering programs that encourage or promote "homosexuality" as a positive lifestyle. The amendment, sponsored by senators Bob Smith (R-N.H.) and Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), also bans counseling or other services on school grounds, or referral of a pupil to an organization that affirms a "homosexual lifestyle."

The amendments were tacked on to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that passed the Senate with a 63-36 vote. The *Washington Post* theorized that over half of the 63 senators voting "yea" did so expecting the amendment to be taken out in the conference on the bill between the Senate and the House. By adding the discriminatory language to a bill that provides \$12.5 billion in federal money to the nations' public schools, Helms and Smith used the Senate floor as a stage for their political gay-bashing, some Washington insiders say.

"The Smith-Helms amendment, if signed into law, will have direct and disastrous impact on gay, lesbian and bisexual youth," said National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Executive Director Peri Jude Radecic. "Studies indicate that gay youth are more likely to attempt suicide because of societal prejudice and hatred exemplified by senators Smith and Helms."

"We need senators to show courage and stand up to Helms," Radecic said. "This amendment puts gay youth in jeopardy. It will have a devastating effect on the lives of living, breathing human beings. Gay youth seeking counsel at school will be turned away under this measure."

One senator speaking out against the amendment voiced those same concerns. Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) condemned the Smith-

Helms amendment, saying, "This amendment has the effect of making it impossible for our schools and our counselors to provide support for these

for other senators to stand up to Helms. In a statement issued following the vote, HRCF spokesman Douglas Hattaway said, "The United States

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Bob Packwood

young people who need that support."

The Human Rights Campaign Fund called Helms' maneuvering "vicious attacks on the freedom of American citizens." The group also called

Senate bowed to the hateful rhetoric of Sen. Jesse Helms and adopted an amendment...that targeted gay youth, their families and their schools for discrimination. Adding the Helms amendment to

the education bill was a harsh and mean-spirited attack on vulnerable young people who need support."

Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.), in an attempt to equalize the Helms-Smith amendment, tacked another amendment on to the bill which bans the promotion of all sexuality. That amendment passed unanimously.

The education bill is not the only one Helms has targeted. In recent months, the senator has added homophobic amendments to an agriculture appropriations bill, to National Endowment for the Arts funding, and to legislation dealing with public employees and veterans.

Some sexual minority civil rights groups fear that Helms and his allies plan to attack a provision of the health reform bill that would prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and health status. No federal law protects lesbians and gay men from being denied medical services or from other discrimination related to health care. The health care reform bill introduced by George Mitchell (D-Maine) would prohibit such discrimination by hospitals, insurance companies and health care professionals.

"No one should be denied access to quality health care because of sexual orientation," said Daniel Zingale, public policy director for HRCF. "Helms has been attaching anti-gay amendments to everything from agriculture department funding to the education bill. Now he and his allies are after our right to quality health care."

"Helms is taking to the Senate floor with a slew of new attacks," said Hattaway. "Helms is running amok on the floor of the United States Senate, waging a campaign of hate and discrimination. These divisive battles are wasting precious time and taxpayer money that should be spent addressing the real problems facing this country."

Northwest senators split their votes on the education amendment. In Oregon, Republican Mark O. Hatfield voted yes, while Republican Bob Packwood voted no. In Washington state, Democrat Patty Murray voted no, while Republican Slade Gorton voted yes.

Norma Paulus, superintendent of the Oregon Department of Education, says that the amendments will have a minimal effect in Oregon. "Schools in Oregon do not promote or encourage sexual activity, whether heterosexual or homosexual," said Paulus.

The bill has been incorporated with HR 6, the House version of the bill, which is similar yet

not identical. In September, a Senate and House conference committee chaired by Sen. Kennedy and Rep. Bill Ford (D-Mich.) will decide the fate of all the amendments and will release a compromise version for both the House and the Senate to vote on.

The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation plans an intensive campaign to repudiate the Senate's endorsement of the legislation. GLAAD spokesman Al Kielwasser said the group would join other civil rights organizations to oppose the bill, which must gain final approval from President Bill Clinton.

"This legislation is nothing less than a death sentence for gay youth," Kielwasser said. "Because of our society's unrelenting homophobia, lesbian, gay and bisexual youth suffer from lowered self-esteem, which can often lead to suicide. The question now is whether Bill Clinton will veto this hateful and ignorant legislation, or whether he will carry out the death sentence."

What you can do

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has produced an August Congressional Action Kit that offers information on the recent Senate actions. The kit offers information about Helms' amendments to the Employment Non-Discrimination Act and his action on the health care reform bill, issues which both impact dramatically the lives of gay men and lesbians. To obtain the kit, write NGLTF, 2320 17th St. NW, Washington, DC 20009, or call (202) 332-6483, ext. 3327. The group's e-mail connection is babnltf@aol.com.

The kit offers advice on how to talk to members of Congress, and includes all the information necessary to make your point for gay and lesbian civil rights.

You may also call your senator and representative directly. Call the U.S. House Switchboard (202) 225-6514, or the U.S. Senate Switchboard (202) 224-3207.