


COMMENTARY / CULTURE

My letter to Payton the gunman!

“Dear Payton “Gunman” Gendron: Okay, you don’t know me and until a week ago, I didn’t know you. But since you disrupted my life when you snuffed out the lives of 10 African Americans in Buffalo, I decided to write you a letter. I include pictures of your victims because I want you to see them in your worst nightmares during your years behind bars. Now the truth is that the awful thing you did was still unsettling even as we’ve become numb to mass shootings in the U. S. What you did to my people in Buffalo was no different from last year’s massacre of Asians in Atlanta, 2019’s massacre of Latinos in El Paso, 2015’s massacre of African Americans at a church in Charleston or the slaughter of people in that synagogue in Pittsburgh. Those who carried out those dreadful acts are probably the ones who inspired you to arm yourself and make the 200-mile drive to Buffalo to initiate the carnage. From I’ve read about you gunman, apparently you suffered so much from boredom in your hometown of Conklin, New York that you read everything you could get your hands on about “Replacement Theory,” the cockamamie conspiracy theory that people of color and immigrants are out to “replace” white people in America. And somewhere you probably came across and was inspired by the “Jews won’t replace us” placards and chants by Alt-Right marchers in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. Am I right gunman? Unfortunately, there are lots of people who share your twisted “replacement” belief but defer to losers like you to act on them while they cheer you

on from the safety of their campaign rallies, TV studios, bars, pristine golf courses in Florida and “members only” country clubs. Yep, you’ve been played gunman. While you’ll be fed tasteless prison food, they’ll be chomping down on rare steaks and sipping fine wine. You found time to write a 180+ page “manifesto” – an instruction manual for copycats I suppose - laced with hate (“N-word” this, “N-word” that, on and on and on). Well, I have some news for you gunman. If you think that you were bored in Conklin, oh boy, you won’t know what real boredom is until you are locked up for the rest of your life for the murders you committed. The friends you thought you had will disappear – vamoose! – like Houdini out of the bottom of a wooden trunk. Now I’ve never heard of Conklin. But thanks to you the image of that city has been irreparably tainted at a time when the city had the pandemic, inflation, skyrocketing gasoline prices and other more important things to worry about. I cannot imagine the level of pain you’ve caused your family and others who knew, or thought they knew you personally. Look gunman, never in my wildest imagination have I worried about being shot in the checkout line at a grocery store, church, mall or concert by someone as hate filled as you. Never. So because of you, do I now have to look over my shoulder with a wary eye at any “suspicious looking” young white male when I’m out? Do I need to stay clear of events that attract large numbers of African Americans, say churches, funerals, Historically Black Colleges and Universities athletic events, homecomings and graduations? Does it make sense for me now to only attend the fragile safety of large gatherings where I’m the only one or just a few of those who look like me? Would it be wise for me to now don a bullet proof vest to protect myself whenever I leave home?



So tell me, are there any safe spaces in America where I and millions of other African Americans don’t have to concern ourselves with being taken out by your ilk because of our race? I’ll end with an excerpt from a piece by Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Leonard Pitts in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack, a few years before you were born gunman. Strike out the words “World Trade Center” and “Pentagon” in the first paragraph and replace them with the word “Buffalo”: “What lesson did you hope to teach us by your coward’s attack on our World Trade Center, our Pentagon, us? What was it you hoped we would learn? Whatever it was, please know that you failed. Did you want us to respect your cause? You just damned your cause. Did you want to make us fear? You just steeled our resolve. Did you want to tear us apart? You just brought us together. Yes, we’re in pain now. We are in mourning, and we are in shock. We’re still grappling with the unreality of the awful thing you did, still working to make ourselves understand. Still, I keep wondering what it was you hoped to teach us. It occurs to me that maybe

you just wanted us to know the depths of your hatred. If that’s the case, consider the message received. And take this message in exchange: You don’t know my people.” In closing gunman, you’ve got lots of time, years in prison hopefully, to comprehend the horrible decision you made, the triggers you pulled. I suggest that you not waste that time engulfed in baseless conspiracy theories or writing another nonconsequential “manifesto.” Instead, spend your time between scrubbing toilets and making license plates by doing other things more productive.... like immersing yourself in African American and other histories. © Terry Howard is an award-winning writer and storyteller. He is also a contributing writer with the Chattanooga News Chronicle, The American Diversity Report, The Douglas County Sentinel, Blackmarket.com, Hometown Advantage, co-founder of the “26 Tiny Paint Brushes” writers’ guild, and recipient of the 2019 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Leadership Award.

This Week in African American History

Johnnie A. Jones Sr. Dies at 102; a Civil Rights Lawyer Early On



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HJohnnie A. Jones Sr. was 24 years old and a future civil rights lawyer not yet graduated from college when he landed on the beaches of Normandy in the D-Day invasion of 1944. He nearly died before his ship reached the shore, when the explosion of a mine sent him flying “sky high into the air,” he recalled, and onto an upper deck. He again almost died when he came under German sniper fire on Omaha Beach. “I remember it all,” Mr. Jones told a Veterans Affairs publication last year. “Sometimes reminiscing is a terrible thing. ... I lay down at night, and as soon as I close my eyes, I relive the whole D-Day invasion.” When Mr. Jones returned home to Louisiana, he was greeted not with a hero’s welcome, but rather with all the indignities of segregation in the Jim Crow South. Riding a bus with fellow U.S. ser-

vice members, Mr. Jones, who was African American, was forced to sit in the back of the coach. He was driving to New Orleans to have shrapnel removed from his neck when a White police officer, entirely unprovoked, pulled him over and began assaulting him. “He knocked me down and started kicking me,” Mr. Jones said. “Things weren’t right. ‘Separate but equal’ was unconstitutional, and I wanted to fight it and make it better.” Mr. Jones did so by enrolling in law school and becoming a lawyer in the early years of the civil rights movement. He was 102 when he died on April 23 at a veterans’ home in Jackson, La. A goddaughter, Mada McDonald, confirmed his death but did not cite a cause. Mr. Jones was credited with fighting legal battles on multiple fronts of the movement for racial equality. He worked with voter leagues and

with civil rights organizations, including the NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). He assisted demonstrators who participated in lunch-counter sit-ins. Twice his car was bombed, he said. After the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education, which outlawed segregation in public schools, he helped accompany about 30 Black children to a White elementary school in Baton Rouge, historian Adam Fairclough wrote in the volume “Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972.” But Mr. Jones played perhaps his most significant role in the 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott, a long-overlooked event that helped inspire the landmark boycott two years later in Montgomery, Ala., prompted by the arrest of Rosa Parks. Mr. Jones was only two weeks out

of law school in June 1953 when the Rev. T.J. Jemison, a founding member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, invited him to represent the organizers of the effort in Baton Rouge. “I told him, ‘That’s an awfully big suit to fill,’” Mr. Jones recalled to a reporter in 2015. “But he said, ‘Nonsense, Brother Jones, you can do it.’” The Baton Rouge demonstration was touched off when Martha White, an African American housekeeper, ignited a controversy by taking a seat in a section of a public bus reserved for White riders. During the eight-day boycott that followed, activists organized carpools that allowed participants to travel to and from work without riding city buses. Eighty percent of the city’s bus ridership at the time was African American. The boycott ended with the partial desegregation of city buses, with the front two rows of seats reserved for White people and the last two rows for Black people. While some protesters had hoped for a more dramatic outcome, historians today describe the Baton Rouge boycott as a prototype of others to come. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. consulted with organizers in Baton Rouge before organizing the Montgomery boycott, which lasted 382 days and ended with a Supreme Court ruling desegregating the Montgomery transit system. “Almost unnoticed at the time,” the Baton Rouge protest “was a direct precursor of the Montgomery bus boycott,” Fairclough wrote, “and an event of major significance in the evolution of the civil rights movement.” Johnnie Anderson Jones was born Nov. 30, 1919, in Laurel Hill, La., and was raised on a plantation where his parents farmed. He attended a two-room schoolhouse and became interested in the law, he said, when a teacher gave him a book by Charles Evans Hughes, then the chief justice of the United States.