

COMMENTARY / CULTURE

Leonard Pitts Jr.: What Do the Book Banners & Burners Fear?



Terry Howard

There are a few things you should be asking yourself right about now.

Meaning you students who find yourselves living in places where self-appointed guardians of public morality have been busily banning books. This includes Texas, where Gov. Greg Abbott wants to jail librarians who allow students access to novels he deems "pornographic." And Tennessee, where a preacher in suburban Nashville held an honest-to-Goebbels book burning to destroy such dangerous texts as "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets."

It includes Pennsylvania, where one

school district now requires a citizens panel to sign off on every book school librarians purchase, and Arizona, where schools are required to publish a list of all newly purchased library materials. And naturally, it includes Florida, where Palm Beach County teachers were ordered to review books in their classroom libraries with an eye toward-purging references to racism, sexism and other systems of oppression, under a new state law restricting the teaching of those subjects.

Not incidentally, this — Sept. 18-24 — is the 40th annual observation of Banned Books Week. It comes at what Publishers Weekly has dubbed a time of "new urgency" in the struggle over intellectual freedom. Last year, it reports, the American Library Association tracked 1,597 individual books challenged or removed from public libraries, schools and universities, the most in the 20 years it has been keeping tabs.

So, yes, you should ask yourself a few things.

Ask yourself: What is it these people are trying to keep you from understanding or feeling? What do they think is going to happen if a book challenges you, confuses you, validates you or just inspires you to see something from another point of view? Why are they so scared that you

might think differently?

Ask yourself: Why is it that many of the books being challenged or banned are by people of color or LGBTQ authors or have themes of race or sexuality? What do the book banners and burners fear from your being exposed to such things? Is it that you might start asking questions that make them uncomfortable? If so, isn't that their problem — not yours?

Ask yourself: Why is it so many of the people who want to ban books from schools are the same ones who have no problem letting guns in? They're terrified that a book will put an idea in your head; why aren't they terrified that a gun will put a bullet there?

Ask yourself: Are you some fragile thing, some piece of human glass who needs the sharp edges and hard surfaces of new ideas bubble-wrapped so that you don't shatter against them? Or are you not smart and capable enough to handle yourself?



Leonard Pitts, Jr./Cheryl Diaz Meyer

© Terry Howard is an award-winning writer and storyteller. He is a contributing writer with the Chattanooga News Chronicle, The American Diversity Report, The Douglas County Sentinel, Blackmarket.com, co-founder of the "26 Tiny Paint Brushes" writers' guild, recipient of the 2019 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Leadership Award, and third place winner of the 2022 Georgia Press Award.

Don't Mess With Fani... No, No, No!

"Don't mess with Bill. No, no no! Don't mess with Bill. Cause he's all mine. Leave my Billy alone. I say it one more time, don't mess with Bill." - The Marvelettes

If I didn't know any better - okay, wishful thinking - it seems that the New York Times has a sneaky way of anticipating what I'm about to write about. How else do I explain its recent front page story about my work on my latest column, the subject of whom is an Atlanta district attorney.

Now speaking of newspapers, a recent headline in one read, "Gang used TV, social media, DA says." And later that evening that DA's name and a short video clip of her popped up in a "Gangs? Drugs? Theft Crimes?" townhall meeting sponsored by a local police department.

That DA? Fulton County, Georgia District Attorney Fani Willis.

Truth is I was close to titling today's narrative "Rubbernecking Fani," in that whenever her name comes up in the news there's a tendency to crane my neck to listen to what she has to say. And, believe me, she never disappoints.

Here's the question: What do ex-president Trump, former NYC mayor Rudy Giuliani, Senator Lindsey Graham, Georgia governor Brian Kemp, rapper Young Thug and members of the Bloods and Crips gang all have in common?

Here's the answer: Nary one of them will be sending a Christmas card to Fani Willis because like "white on rice," Willis is relentless in issuing subpoenas and indictments against these men for alleged efforts to overturn the recent presidential election or, in the case of the gang members, for plotting home invasions and burglaries. Thus the bet here is that in some circles Willis is probably dubbed "polarizing" at a minimum or an 'angry Black Woman,' tags I suspect she wears as badges of honor.

Now this is not really a column about Fani Willis per se. Or, for that matter, is it about her laser like focus in rooting out corruption and the toxicity spewed in rap

music. It is, rather, a case study in fearless leadership, audacity and courage, qualities we could use a lot more of nowadays.

Chutzpah, gall, audacity, not sure what to call it, but there's something special about Fani Willis; something I can't quite put my finger on. Her swagger and bare knuckles style, valued in men, less so in women, is downright refreshing.

So who is this woman who a police chief called out in unbridled glee during a recent town hall meeting on crime and gangs as the kind of tough leader badly needed in his city?

To begin, Willis attended Howard University, the same university that produced Vice President Kamala Harris, writer Toni Morrison, late actor Chadwick Boseman and Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall. Emory University is where she earned her law degree.

Willis cut her legal teeth by spending 16 years as a prosecutor in the Fulton County, Georgia district attorney's office. In her years as a procecutor, she led more than 100 jury trials and handled hundreds of murder cases which led to a 90 percent conviction rate. "I wore a pager and got up in the middle of the night and walked over bodies," she said. "So I know what kind of pain it causes when you lose someone."

Her most prominent case was her 2013 indictments in the Atlanta public schools cheating scandal.

Last year Willis launched a criminal investigation into an infamous phone call to the Georgia Secretary of State by Trump to "find" enough votes to ensure his victory in Georgia. That opened a



floodgate to other investigations, including subpoenas to Giuliani, Graham and Kemp. Next in her crosshairs are local gangs and violent lyrics by rappers.

In May this year, Willis's office indicted the "Young Thug" for 56 counts of gang-related crimes under Georgia's Racketeer Influence and Corrupt Organizations statute and felony charges for possession of illicit firearms and drugs. She indicted 26 "Drug Rich" gang members for plotting home invasions and burglaries in Fulton County.

"If you thought Fulton was a good county to bring your crime to, to bring your violence to, you are wrong and you are going to suffer consequences," she said at a recent news conference. She cautioned rappers to stop using criminal activities in rap lyrics because she has no plans to stop using them in her cases against them.

"I think if you decide to admit your crimes over a beat, I'm gonna use it," Willis said. "I'm going to continue to do that. People can continue to be angry about it. I have some legal advice for you: don't confess to crimes in rap lyrics if you do not want them used—or at least get out of my county."

These days critics of Willis come from both conservatives and liberals, and even from some African Americans who called her a sellout for her use of rap lyrics to build her anti-gang cases and focusing too much on incarcerating poor African Americans. Unmoved, an unapologetic Willis is quick to rattle off a list of innovations she has implemented including alternative sentencing and diversion programs, and a criminal justice class for public school children.

I close with a warning: don't think for a moment that your race, age, wealth, gang affiliation, rap lyrics or political position will immune you from indictments with Fani Willis on your tail....because she's coming after ya?

Okay readers, sing after me: "Don't mess with Fani....No, no no!....Leave my Fani alone"

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This Week in African American History

ELIZABETH DENNISON



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LEARN TO READ READ TO LEARN

Elizabeth Dennison was born as a slave in Detroit before the Northwest Ordinance was passed. People called her Lisette (liz-et). Her family was owned by William Tucker, a pioneer in the area of today's Mount Clemens.

In 1805, William Tucker died. He wrote in his will that Lisette's parents were to be set free. But freedom did not come to Lisette and her brothers. They were now owned by William Tucker's wife and sons. Lisette's father and mother were not happy that their children were still slaves.

Since the Northwest Ordinance made slavery against the law in the Michigan Territory, Lisette and her brothers went to court to get their freedom in 1807. The judge said that only the youngest child could be free. That was because the older children were born before the Northwest Ordinance started. So Lisette was still a slave. Lisette wanted to live in Michi-

gan, but she knew if she moved to Canada, she would be free. She, a brother, and others in the family ran away to Canada.

Many years later, Lisette returned to live in Detroit. Lisette was treated like an immigrant from Canada, so she was now free in Michigan too.

In 1827, Lisette married a man named Scipio (sip-ee-oh) Forth. There is no record of Scipio's death, but it is believed that their marriage lasted less than three years.

After Scipio's death, Lisette worked for others, taking care of them and their homes. She worked for John Biddle and his wife. Mr. Biddle worked in politics and helped to write Michigan's Constitution. Lisette became friends with Mr. Biddle's wife. Both women felt the need for more churches in Detroit and made a plan to give money to build a chapel, or church. Lisette worked hard and saved

her money. She invested in a steamboat, a bank, and some land. That was very rare for a woman to do, and even more rare for a black woman to do. When she died in 1866, Lisette had around \$2,000 to \$3,000. About \$1,500 of that money went to help build the St. James Church in Grosse Ile (gross eel), Michigan.

