

INSIGHT



Tennessee can cancel Nashville, but here's why lawmakers shouldn't

Red retaliation?

Members of prominent civic groups, including the Nashville Rotary Club and the Economic Club of Nashville, were eager to ask the VIP keynote guest about state lawmakers' plans to shrink the Metro Council in half during the week of Jan. 23.

Tennessee House Speaker Cameron Sexton, a Republican from Crossville, wields enormous influence in his legislative chamber led by a GOP supermajority. He told audience members that the General Assembly has free rein to insert itself into the affairs of the capital city, which votes overwhelmingly Democratic. It is correct that the counties and cities are extensions of and allowed to function at the will of the state.

Meanwhile, city leaders are sweating. Metro Nashville Law Director Wallace Dietz said the proposal to reduce the council's size from 40 to 20 seats would cause "chaos." This would undermine 60 years of a metropolitan city-county government that

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ERIN CRABB; USA TODAY NETWORK; GETTY IMAGES

What Memphis can learn from the brutal death of Tyre Nichols

Amber Sherman speaks as protesters gather Jan. 27 in Memphis prior to the release of police video depicting five Memphis officers beating Tyre Nichols, whose death three days later resulted in murder charges and provoked outrage at the country's latest instance of police brutality. AP



The death of Tyre Nichols after being beaten by Memphis police officers is sinister, sickening and sad. Making it even worse is that the offending officers are African Americans. The victim is Black, and the offenders are Black.

Many of us in Memphis and across the nation are grieving, and will continue to grieve for months, some for years.

The unarmed 29-year-old father, son and brother was tasered, pepper-sprayed, beaten, kicked and pummeled with fists by police during a traffic stop. He finally was taken to a hospital in critical condition and died of his injuries three days later.

Initially five policemen were put on leave, then fired, indicted, arrested and charged with seven crimes, including second-degree murder and aggravated assault. I was shocked when the faces of the involved officers were flashed on the television screen. Like many, I assumed this was yet another case of white cops killing an innocent Black man.

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Systemic racism at root of police misconduct, no matter officer's race



Lynn Norment
Guest columnist

INSIDE:

Perspectives: The killing of Tyre Nichols.
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Activist Avi Poster was a man of big shoulders and my friend



Keel Hunt
Guest columnist

Avi Poster always seemed to me to be everywhere – so many were the honorable causes that drove him forward.

He was the kind of character you enjoyed meeting – and made you feel better about this city. To me, he lived the welcoming spirit of most people I know in Nashville.

Our city lost this good man to illness on Jan. 26. Today, a lot of us are reflecting, in our grief, on the scope of his civic influence.

Avi's social activism was not of the meek and anxious sort but was muscular, kindly assertive and deeply felt. He could also do meek, of course, as situations dictated.

He was the leader of two task forces – one on affordable housing, the other on criminal justice – of the citywide initiative called Nashville Organized for Action and Hope, NOAH's former director Mike Hodge told me last Sunday.

Avi formed lasting partnerships to fight for just causes

Among his closest allies was Tom Negri, who in his day job was a leading hotelier in the city. They were partners in many causes, most of them in defense of underdogs across the city, across humanity.

Both men were reared in immigrant families, Americans who came from somewhere else – Avi's from Israel, Tommy's from Italy – so both knew the obstacles that confront many new Americans.

I caught up with Negri last Sunday afternoon and learned these two men met soon after Avi moved to Nashville from

Chicago in 2001.

Avi had been a teacher and principal in the Chicago schools system. One of his first meetings in Nashville was with Dr. Jesse Register, then the city's new director of schools. Soon, Avi was asked by the Chamber of Commerce to lead the city's "Report Card" Committee evaluating the performance of Metro Schools. Then came a host of causes and campaigns that drew both Poster and Negri, so passionate was their zeal for defending marginal populations.

I saw this phenomenon unfold in early 2008 when the city was faced with a citywide referendum on whether to make English the official language of Metropolitan Government. (That short-lived "English only" push came from a mean, dark place, part of a hard-right campaign national to make life harder for newcomers.)

Poster and Negri put themselves actively in the forefront of the opposition, together with Mayor Karl Dean and a host of other broad-minded civic leaders concerned about the city's profile as a welcoming place. When the final vote came, in January 2009, the proposition went down overwhelmingly to a just defeat.

Reflections on Avi's life from influential friends

Over the past weekend, it didn't take long to hear from others here who feel what Avi felt and believed about our Nashville and the face we present to the world. I asked these people two questions ("When did you meet Avi Poster?" and "under what circumstances?"). Many cited that English-only campaign as the time they met this broad-gauged man.

Broadcast journalist Demetria Kalodimos was one of these. She "can't recall where we met, but we had Chicago roots and routes in common. He was always fired up about something, in the best



Community advocate Avi Poster: "It's my hope these kids will not only raise their voices continually as they have in the street, but they'll go into the voting box and vote. And it's my hope they'll run for office." BRAD SCHMITT / TENNESSEAN

way."

(Chicago was a telling mention. From my younger days as a student there, no matter how little or long you may have lived in the "City of the Big Shoulders," as Carl Sandburg famously called it, Chicago had the energy to shape you. Maybe it was the influence of Lake Michigan or the broad blue horizon that it causes whenever you look to the east, but it all puts you in mind of great possibilities. Like the words of the writers Nelson Algren, Gwendolyn Brooks, Studs Terkel or Mike Royko – all the struggles and hopes anyone might derive. Especially so for Avi, pondering his own ancestry, and what became his lifelong advocacy for the underdog.)

The Nashville labor leader Maura-Lee Albert told me, "Engaging in life with Avi involved equal parts joy and ar-

guments all rolled up together. I will miss him deeply!"

It was at Midtown Café, in 2017, when Randy Rayburn remembers meeting Avi: They chatted "until his guests arrived. He asked me to join him afterwards, and soon Avi became like an adopted older brother who was the epitome of a *mensch* who texted and emailed topics daily to friends and larger groups."

Fabian Bedne, the architect and former Metro Council member, said it was "at the chamber's Report Card Committee and my congregation" where he met Avi. "I immediately wanted to be friends with him. It's been hard accepting he is gone. It makes me angry and extremely sad."

Lisa Wiltshire was a staff adviser to Jesse Register in 2009 when she encountered Avi. "He meant so much to me, like so many others he shepherded through life. What a beautiful man he was."

Saying no to Avi was always hard

Today, my own comment to Avi would be: "Thank you for being my friend."

Thinking about our city's loss has, for me, the feel of a large boulder that's been yanked TVA-like from a riverbed by some giant earth-mover. This particular boulder – Avi's large compassion that always pushed back against indifference in the larger society – has vanished. And maybe the indifference is winning.

But I imagine Avi would quickly tell me, "No, you push back against the indifference now. From this point forward, it's your turn."

Of course, I always found it hard to say "No" to the broad-shouldered man.

Keel Hunt, columnist for the USA TODAY NETWORK Tennessee, is also the author of four books. Read more at www.keelhunt.com

How books are connecting Tenn. military parents and children



Your Turn
James Pond
Guest columnist

"Hey kid, you have two options," my high school English teacher said to me. "Option 1: We talk about the military and how it could be a positive move for your future. Option 2: We open this envelope and have a different conversation."

At age 18, my life came down to two options, based on SAT scores in an envelope. I never opened the envelope, but I made the decision that day to join the United States Marines.

I learned much while in the service, including something that has led me to pursue my passion today: the importance of family connections fostered by reading together.

In 1990, my wife, Athena, and I welcomed Ashley Jordan into the world at Camp Pendleton. In 1992, son Gabriel James arrived at MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina. (Daughter Ali would round out our family in 1996 after I left the military.)

I became "Dad." We moved 12 times in six years. I was deployed frequently for shorter periods of time, but I was fortunate to be there for both Ashley and Gabby's births.

I was "Deployed Dad" most of 1991-1993, the earliest years of my children's

lives, which research shows are the most critical for brain development and bonding. Athena's biggest supports were from my unit and their families back home. We didn't have the systems and resources that many military families have today. We didn't know what was available or how to access it.

These were the days before wi-fi, video phones and apps for unlimited messaging. Connection was dependent on physical mail and the occasional, staticky phone call. The best joy was hearing my kids' voices. The most important was telling them I loved them.

In October 1993, I was going to be sent on a two-year unaccompanied tour. I finally had another option. I left the service to become "Dad At Home" full-time.

Everything changed when I became "Dad At Home," my favorite title. I spent endless, memory-making time with my kids. Our favorite was Saturday morning pajama breakfast at the local donut shop. No Mom allowed. We read books, told stories, watched movies and got to know each other. "Lion King" and the "Little Mermaid" were on repeat. Storytime was real and in-person with no static and lots of laughs, questions, and conversations.

"Deployed Dad" focused on thoughtful connection when possible, but I still missed normal, everyday moments with my kids during the early years. I couldn't see the spark in their eyes when they learned a new sound, pointed out new

things on a page, or laughed when I made silly faces acting out a story. I wish there had been more intentional ways to connect military families through meaningful interactions like story time. Books build skills, but also build bonds.

That's why Governor's Early Literacy Foundation (GELF) has partnered with United Through Reading to connect military service members with their children through the gift of reading. With the help of Amazon, GELF is providing 10,000 books for military service members to video-record reading them aloud, and the recording and book will be sent to their children at home in Tennessee.

Through this gift, 1,220 military-connected children, birth to age 8 across Tennessee, including Tennessee National Guard, Air National Guard, Naval Support Activity Mid-South, NSA Mid-South CDC, families stationed at Fort Campbell, and the 4th Marines Recruiting District, will receive eight high-quality, age-appropriate books to keep families reading together and a book light to remind them of their loved ones. Service members can read the donated books aloud while being privately recorded with the United Through Reading App, and the videos and books will be sent to their children.

There are nearly 38,000 active duty, Guard, and Reserve military children in Tennessee, making it the 12th-largest military child state in the country.

The Professional Counselor's article "Revolving Doors: The Impact of Multiple School Transitions on Military Children," reports that school-age military children are especially vulnerable to the stress related to frequent transitions, as they must simultaneously cope with normal developmental stressors such as establishing peer relationships, conflict in parent-child relationships and increased academic demands.

Research shows reading aloud with military children on a regular basis through United Through Reading videos encourages early literacy and language skills, vocabulary development and growth, and a love of reading that promises they will be lifelong readers.

The gift of reading not only gives children a brighter future, but it can bring comfort and connect families. Families come together, but many are always distanced. Reading can keep families together when they are apart.

Help us give the gift of reading. For more information on how to support literacy for Tennessee children, visit GovernorsFoundation.org.

James Pond is president of the Governor's Early Literacy Foundation. Driven by a mission to strengthen early literacy in Tennessee, Governor's Early Literacy Foundation (GELF) is a nonpartisan 501c3 that equips Tennessee's children with books and innovative literacy tools that encourage lifelong learning for a brighter future.

Plazas

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fund the Music City Center, Nashville's convention center. Lt. Gov. Randy McNally said, "Metro has made it clear they are no longer interested in aggressively recruiting top-tier conventions to Nashville."

That would be a big blow to Nashville's economy. A disemboweled Nashville-Davidson County Government will be a challenge to run for the mayor and

his successors. Mayor John Cooper announced Tuesday he would not seek reelection in 2023.

It shouldn't be this way. The need for better relations has never been more important.

Sexton, Lee and others tout Tennessee as having the "best economy" in the nation. It's true that the state's business climate attracts big companies and entrepreneurs alike.

However, another reason Tennessee attracts people is its metro areas that are more culturally diverse, hosting major education and cultural institutions,

and serving as the gateways for Tennessee's famed hospitality.

How does bringing down the hammer on Nashville serve the life, liberty and happiness of ordinary citizens? It does not at all, but rather, it satisfies an itch to project power.

If Sexton and the bill supporters care about how Nashvillians govern themselves, they should give them a say. Otherwise, legislators are just imposing their will upon the people.

Now is the time to review Article I, Section II of the Tennessee Constitution: "That government being instituted

for the common benefit, the doctrine of nonresistance against arbitrary power and oppression is absurd, slavish and destructive of the good and happiness of mankind."

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