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



Senate Speaker/Lt. Gov. Randy McNallv

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IGHT

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, peppersprayed, 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. **Black Tennessee** Voices, 6H

Inside Insight Civility Tennessee: Climate displacement is happening now and we must pay it heed. 5H | Perspectives: State and legislative issues. 8H

#### **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

#### The legacy of Avi Poster: People

My friend Avi Poster set a high standard for compassion, determination and love of neighbor. The cornerstone of that standard was simple. Everyone was his neighbor – the immigrant, the refugee, the low-to-no wealth families and, of course, every single child in this city.

Avi was not rich, was not powerful in any traditional sense. But well beyond his recent passing, he will be remembered because he worked for justice and opportunity - and somehow loved evervone along that difficult path. Remarkable in this age of cynicism, acrimony and meanness, Avi was passionate about his "people first" positions without assassination of others who had different priorities.

Avi was in every conversation and fight that impacted people from English-only to affordable housing to the reduction of poverty. His legacy? People, of course. Nashvillians who will do the work of advocating for the needs, talents and promise of the marginalized in this city. Let's do the work.

Marsha Edwards, president and CEO, Martha O'Bryan Center

#### **Tennessee should punish Nashville** over RNC snub

Tennessee Senate Majority Leader Jack Johnson's bill SB 648 to stop funding Nashville's convention center has my full support.

The privilege tax awarded to the Tourism Development Zone around the convention was authorized to help promote tourism in a nonpartisan manner. As the bill was written, everyone was a winner with the funds generated.

The Metro Council decided to make a political statement by blocking a deal to host the 2024 Republican National Convention. The conservative estimate is \$300 million in lost revenue to Nashville. The reasoning from the council was security concerns and political vitriol risk and a strain on the Metro Nashville Police Department.

The Metro Council voted to not host the RNC without the preferences of their constituents. I personally contacted the at-large council members without the first reply. This group had their mind made up from the beginning and make no mistake, this was a political message sent. Message received: "If Nashville wants to prioritize political posturing over prosperity for its people, that's their prerogative. But the state does not have to participate," said Lt. Gov. Randy McNally.

Isaac Newton quote: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."

Steve Jones, Nashville 37221

#### State should get on marijuana bandwagon

Antonio Cathey speaks as demonstrators block traffic on Interstate 55 at the Memphis-Arkansas Bridge as they protest the killing of Tyre Nichols on Jan. 27 in Memphis. CHRIS DAY/THE JACKSON SUN

## Garner to Nichols: When will we stop police brutality?

I am an attorney in Memphis and I changed the law. am certainly not alone in shedding tears at the latest incident in our city.

I was a college student in 1974 and recall the death of Edward Garner, shot by the police. I cried for his family that his life ended at age 15 and I recall the controversy, the justifications and vilifications from people afraid of crime, saying things like, "He got what he deserved," and, "The officer ought to get an award for shooting a criminal," or, "When the police tell you to stop ...'

Edward Garner was trying to climb a 6-foot chain-link fence to get away after a burglary when he was shot once in the back of the head.

Under the law of Tennessee at the time, the so-called Fleeing Felon Rule, the officer was legally justified, protected from prosecution. Edward's father said his son should not have been killed, that his civil right to life had been violated, and sued.

I followed the case as it went through the federal courts. The U.S. Supreme Court decided it in 1985 and

But that did not change the approach of law enforcement to force and violence. As crime increased, public support grew and claims of police brutality were met with justification and denial. The militarization of policing increased, as did the violence of police-public contacts. Young men, often Black or Brown, were the victims and more and more justifiably feared for their lives.

The advent of video monitoring has finally begun to help. From Rodney King to George Floyd and now Tyre Nichols, we are at last forced to confront the truth that some of the violent criminals on our streets wear badges.

Maybe the public's brutal awakening will result in changes in our approach to policing and training officers. Perhaps our society can grow to a place where officers will "protect and defend" even from crimes by their fellow officers. But something must change.

Erich M. Shultz lives in Memphis.

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substantial and compelling interest in protecting minors from physical and emotional harm." This is indeed an important issue, which is why it's so disheartening that this bill would do more harm than good.

Transgender minors face much higher rates of bullying, depression and suicidal thoughts than their peers. However, these rates decline when they're able to use the pronouns of their choice, feel support from their parents and peers, or receive gender-affirming medical care. For example, one study found that adults who received puberty blockers in their youth were 70% less likely to consider suicide throughout their lifetimes. Another found that gender-affirming surgeries made trans people about half as likely to consider or attempt suicide. Meanwhile, fewer than 1% of those who get these surgeries express regret, compared with roughly 14% of patients undergoing other surgeries.

Many other studies corroborate these findings, and so the evidence is clear: gender-affirming care for minors has many benefits and few risks. Lawmakers, health care providers, and others who want to protect minors should therefore pave the way for them to receive this low-risk and potentially lifesaving standard of care. Anything else risks the very physical and emotional harm that this bill seeks to address.

Benjamin P. Gold, Nashville 37216

#### Beware of not getting into war with Russia

I'm sure most Americans would like to see Russian forces driven out of Ukraine. That invasion was simply a land grab as a part of Vladimir Putin's Soviet Union ambitions.

So, we here in the U.S. along with several European countries, especially Germany, have sent major support to Ukraine. But I believe our "blank check" approach has gotten out of hand.

After sending billions and billions of taxpayer dollars, we now plan to send 31 M1 Abrams tanks to help Kyiv break the stalemate as the war enters its 12th month. Whoa! It's time to take a deep breath and realize where this could lead. First, the Abrams is our most expensive and complicated tank ever. That means we will have to send American advisers over there to train their soldiers. I'm sure the Russians would like to discover the Abrams' strengths and weaknesses on the battlefield. And let's consider this question. How do we get these monster tanks to Ukraine in the first place? Most likely by sea. Suppose a Russian submarine commander spots a boatload of Abrams. What do you think his first reaction might be? I believe it's time to back off our unlimited support for Ukraine before we bankrupt our country and find ourselves in a war with Russia.

hol and drug use, marijuana defiantly would not make addiction worse, since it is not physically addictive.

Other states are reaping the benefit of additional tax revenue from marijuana sales. Let's not be among the last state to welcome more money in the coffers

Elaine Hackerman, Nashville, 37209

#### **Cameron Sexton speaks in** contradictions

birth. "It's all about keeping our citizens safe.'

Puzzled, I asked, "How does that square with open carry and no gun permits required?

He mentioned the Second Amendment, then said if someone pulled a gun on him, he would want to have one to aim back.

In closing, he suggested we'd have fewer problems if families acted like they did in the 1950s sitting around the dinner table together.

It's time that the Tennessee General Assembly directs its attention towards improving the economy of the state.

Marijuana legalization would bring in license fees and sales tax revenue that the state greatly needs.

The Department of Children Services certainly needs more revenue for salaries and housing of children. Affordable housing grants would provide living space for those without homes and those struggling with rent. Crime fighters can certainly use additional funds to reduce domestic violence, road rage, gang violence, training and such. Streets and highways need more revenue than the gas tax provides.

And while at it, butt out of Metro decisions, made by residents, which have affected self-rule and the best economy in the state.

With Tennessee ranking high in alco-

On Jan. 23, Cameron Sexton, speaker of the Tennessee House, spoke at the Nashville Rotary Club.

He said, "Tennesseans regardless of location deserve access to quality education." I agree. It's essential for a strong workforce.

I wondered: Why isn't health care part of creating a strong workforce? Sexton opposed Medicaid expansion, costing Tennesseans 8 billion in federal dollars and contributing to rural hospitals' closures.

"We don't want the federal government telling us what services we need."

He said, "It's up to you and your doctor to make health care decisions for yourself."

"How is that possible given the law banning abortion care?" I asked.

He responded that women would be getting abortions to the moment of

The 1950s! Fewer women worked outside the home. Women weren't allowed to make contracts, buy or sell property. Schools were racially segregated, as were bus and train stations. No Voting Rights Act until the 1960s. Sexton seems to believe that Americans lived like "Leave it to Beaver."

He suggests state government knows better than we do about how to live.

Sexton is a threat to freedom in Tennessee.

Elizabeth B. Crook, Nashville 37212

#### **Protecting minors means allowing** gender-affirming care

This past week, the Tennessee General Assembly began considering HB1/ SB1, which would block gender-affirming medical care for minors. As this bill states, Tennessee has a "legitimate,

John Bridges, Nashville 37217

### **Plazas**

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voters strongly affirmed in 1962. In 2015, a majority of voters rejected a charter amendment (No. 2) to cut the elected body's membership by a third.

There is a larger point, however, and that is one of respect for the self-determination and self-governance of ordinary citizens, who are stuck in the middle of a clash between state and city elected leaders over politics.

The Tennessee Constitution is clear that "all power is inherent in the people" and citizens have a constitutional right to abolish their government. They also have a right to "peace, safety and happiness," but the red-blue battle royale that would upend Metro Government during a municipal election year creates instability, uncertainty and animus all at once.

#### Many states and cities are at odds

On Jan. 19, the Washington, D.C.based think tank Brookings Institution released a report detailing the contentious relationship between states and municipalities.

Titled "Why State and Local Relationships Matter to National Prosperity," the report's authors, Amy Liu and Peter Rezk, wrote that national politics have led to the decision by states to meddle in local affairs and the "combination of harsh preemption and political polarization is most acute especially in the Midwest and South."

They offered examples from places such as Jackson, Mississippi, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Nashville where state legislatures have snubbed requests or undone local ordinances on topics ranging from fixing the water system to local-hire requirements for employers.

The authors lamented the "coarsening of state and local relationships that could threaten the transformative use of billions in federal infrastructure funds and other investments flowing to states and local communities.'

In recent years, Tennessee lawmakers have rejected federal money in the form of Medicaid expansion and Gov. Bill Lee's administration recently decided without clear explanation to stop accepting federal HIV/AIDS funding after May 31.

This back-and-forth has implications for rural, suburban and urban communities alike. "There is a need for a constructive state and local relationship in every state," the authors wrote.

Moreover, the authors point out that metro areas make up the largest share of states' Gross Domestic Product. That figure is 84.5% in Tennessee and the Nashville-Franklin-Murfreesboro area accounts for 36.1% of the total.

#### Metro areas as a share of **Tennessee's GDP**

• Nashville-Murfreesboro-Franklin: 36.1%

- Memphis: 17.7%
- Knoxville: 12.2%
- Chattanooga: 7.3%
- Kingsport: 2.4%
- Jackson: 2.3%
- Johnson City: 2.1%
- Clarksville: 1.7%
- Morristown: 1.4%
- Cleveland: 1.3%
- Other communities: 15.5%

#### Politics takes precedence over the ordinary citizen

It is interesting that Milwaukee and Nashville are mentioned in the same paragraph in the Brookings report.

In 2022, Nashville's Metro Council voted down an agreement to host the Republican National Convention in 2024. Milwaukee received the nod instead.

Rumors of retaliation swirled and actions to punish Nashville are now afoot. In the latest salvo, there is a bill to de-

### 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 shortlived "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 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 arguments 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 TO-DAY 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 Gabe's births.

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

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 TenThe 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.

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

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.

### 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."

David Plazas is the director of opinion and engagement for the USA TO-DAY Network Tennessee. He is an editorial board member of The Tennessean. He hosts the Tennessee Voices videocast and curates the Tennessee Voices and Latino Tennessee Voices newsletters. Call him at (615) 259-8063, email him at dplazas@tennessean.com or tweet to him at @davidplazas.

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