

J.B. Stoner: Last of the Die-Hard Racists

In Atlanta "the candidate of love" fans the flames of racial discord

It was at one of those candidate forums on the rubber-chicken circuit a decade ago that the stubby little man with the limp and the mean squinty eyes made the Georgia public take notice of him. He did it with a piece of psychological brutality reminiscent of the old country joke in which you get a mule's attention by slamming the animal between the eyes with a plank.

There's something in Georgia's political air that causes the state's election ballots to be flooded with candidates, many of them not even worth dignifying as long shots. So it was in 1970, with no fewer than 10 contenders running for governor. But only two of them really mattered. They were former Governor Carl Sanders and a onetime state senator from Sumter County named Jimmy Carter.

Neither Sanders nor Carter's stand-in, a young University of Georgia graduate named Hamilton Jordan, captured the headlines of the news stories filed on the West End Kiwanis Club's forum. The major news belonged to two of those "minor" candidates. One was a Negro ("black" was not commonly used in Georgia newspapers at the time) lawyer named C.B. King, who spoke with a preacher's voice and had the diction and vocabulary of an Oxford don. And the other was Jesse Benjamin Stoner, Jr., self-styled "white racist." With a genius for the mocking, outrageous touch, Stoner touted himself as "the candidate of love — love of the white race."

King couldn't win, of course, but he received ample attention from a

press intrigued by the first candidacy of a black for statewide office since Reconstruction. Stoner, likewise an attorney, was little known. But the press, the FBI and the Anti-Defamation League, three groups ever watchful for budding Nazism, all had thick files on J.B. Stoner because of his role as head of a small racist and anti-Semitic organization called the National States Rights Party.

It may have been a tasteless joke or an honest oversight; only the guilty know for sure. Either way, it turned out that King and Stoner were seated together at the head table. While the other candidates tucked into the luncheon that preceded the politicking, Stoner took not a bite. Well aware that reporters and some of the club members had noticed, Stoner caressed his double chin and smiled slyly, as if harboring some delightful secret. When his turn came, Stoner disclosed his secret. "I don't eat with niggers." His hosts blanched. "Never have."

Then he turned to politics. "C.B. King isn't likely to get too many nigger votes," said the candidate of love. "The nigger vote is owned by the bankers, the Chamber of Commerce and the Jews, and they deliver it to the candidate of their choice." That candidate, Stoner said, was Sanders. The absent Carter, then running a conservative, segregationist-tinged campaign that would win him the governorship and a springboard to the White House, was, in Stoner's words, "no conservative at all, but the hippies' candidate." This was presumably true because Carter campaigned on Georgia campuses.

Stoner's finish in the

By William Terry

1970 Democratic primary, his debut in Georgia politics, never brought him close to winning. But editorial writers, columnists and the clergy were appalled by his 17,663 votes, good enough for fourth place behind C.B. King. In subsequent races for statewide office — he skipped only 1976 — Stoner more than tripled his vote in his best showing.

Stoner's ostentatious cruelty at that Kiwanis luncheon was nothing less than typical. During that same primary campaign he scornfully called a fellow also-ran, a Georgia physician who made no bones about being a segregationist, a "veterinarian" for treating black patients. Stoner has publicly called Adolf Hitler a "moderate," referred to Jews as the "children of the devil" and branded former Atlanta Mayor Sam Massell a "Christ-killing Jew."

In Stoner's mouth the assassinated Nobel Prize winner becomes "Martin Lucifer Coon" — especially if the television cameras are rolling. At a televised political forum during the 1978 elections, when Stoner was again running for governor, the moderator warned him he would be cut off if he continued to say "nigger" on the air. Undaunted, Stoner switched to "chocolate drop."

Stoner's words make mere segregationists cringe. Former Georgia Governor Lester Maddox, himself no slouch at racial invective, walked off a platform during a Stoner diatribe in the 1970 campaign. Most of the other candidates did likewise. "It got to be nauseating," Maddox told reporters. Sure he was a segregationist, but there was no personal hatred in it. "People can't help what they were born," Maddox explained.

Former Georgia Governor Marvin Griffin, as staunch a partisan of racial purity as he is a charming storyteller, told the Atlanta Press Club that Stoner's racism reminded him of the tale about the drunk aboard the sinking *Titanic*: "I ordered ice, but this is ridiculous."

The pudgy, crewcut lawyer is best known for the vitriol of his campaign style, but politics may be just the tip of the iceberg. Stoner is a suspect in a number of civil-rights bombings — the dynamiting of synagogues and black churches that punctuated a tortured era. He has waged a two-year fight against extradition to Alabama for prosecution in the 1958 bombing of a Birmingham church that once served as a civil-rights field headquarters. Ironically, the bomb exploded harmlessly in a parking lot.

William J. Baxley, the former attorney general of Alabama who brought that bombing indictment against Stoner, admits his investigators considered the Georgia white supremacist

their main suspect in the 1963 bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in which four young Sunday-school girls were killed. Baxley conceded that Alabama investigators followed a blind alley for nearly two years before deciding there wasn't enough evidence to pin the bombing on Stoner.

The U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee investigating the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., questioned Stoner about possible ties to the King assassination — the fact that he briefly represented James Earl Ray after the murder, and Stoner's long and continuing relationship with Ray's younger brother, Jerry.

The FBI, after checking Stoner's whereabouts on April 4, 1968 (he was speaking at a white-supremacy rally in Meridian, Mississippi), dropped him as a suspect. Eleven years later the subcommittee determined that, despite

"He will tell only his birthplace and the fact that he has been fighting Jews and niggers' all his life."

some circumstantially provocative associations, there was no evidence linking Stoner to the King assassination.

J.B. Stoner clearly loves attention. During his numerous extradition hearings he dressed for the TV cameras in a red blazer with a dime-store Confederate flag stuck in the breast pocket. Maybe it's because in his adolescence he was little noticed. What notice he *did* get was actually tinged with pity.

"I don't remember him saying but one word: 'Hello.' And he didn't initiate that," recalled newsman Lee Anderson, a classmate of Stoner's in the early Forties at "City" High in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Anderson made a point to greet the retiring, polio-crippled lad whenever he saw him. "It's like with the ugly girl in class — you always try to be polite," he now says.

Stoner will talk at length today, but he deals only in the racial polemics that are his stock-in-trade. About himself he will tell only his birthplace and the fact that he has been "fighting Jews and niggers" all his life. The rest is nobody's business. "My personal life is private ... the public doesn't care about that," he coldly rebuked an interviewer who had been combing for facts about his early life. "The only ones who do are the newspapers and the Jews."

There are big pieces missing from the puzzle that spells out who J.B. Stoner is, but there are enough to show a basic portrait of the sickly child of a well-to-do family who emerged as a political extremist from a childhood warped by illness and death.

The only son of Jesse B. Stoner, Sr., and Minerva Pogue, young Stoner was born 55 years ago in Walker County, Georgia, in the rolling Chattanooga Valley at the foot of Lookout Mountain. Stoner is a common name in the Chattanooga area. "They are rather an old family in the Southern sense, esteemed, and having attained some wealth," recalled John Popham, former managing editor of the *Chattanooga Free Press*. A cousin of the younger Stoner was society editor of the *Free Press*; an uncle was the fire and police chief of the town of Lookout Mountain.

Jesse Stoner, Sr., launched the first sight-seeing tours of Chattanooga and historic Lookout Mountain, scene of a famous Civil War battle. The elder Stoner began his career as a conductor on one of the inclined railroad trains that traveled the mountain. At 31 he invested his savings in one rail car and formed the Chattanooga Sight-Seeing Company. He expanded his fleet with the addition of new cars and, in time, sight-seeing buses. He died of cancer at 48, leaving his five-year-old son and three daughters. "Minnie" Stoner sold her interest in her husband's company and retired to the family farm in Walker County. When young Stoner was 17, he lost his mother, reportedly to cancer.

Other than acknowledging an early familiarity with black servants — "I learned about niggers early" — Stoner will not talk about his youth. A cousin who visited occasionally at the Southern colonial-style home in Walker County where young Stoner grew up describes a graceful home with a library and with a grand piano in the living room. She remembers Stoner as a "quiet, sweet child. It's so incongruous how he turned out. I don't believe J.B. would physically hurt anyone," the cousin remarked. "I don't understand his feeling the way he does. I never will understand."

"The way he's turned out is absolutely contrary to everything we try to instill in our students," said a former teacher at Chattanooga's McCallie School. Stoner attended the school, a prestigious college-prep institution, as a freshman and sophomore in the early Forties. McCallie was then a military school, but Stoner was excused from drill because of his crippled left leg.

A picture of Stoner in the 1940 *Penn-*
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treaty was bitterly opposed by the Department of Defense. A glance at the list of projects being studied by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency will tell you why. The Pentagon is eagerly learning how to create and control tidal waves, fire storms, lightning, electromagnetic brain-wave effects, volcanoes, earthquakes and a host of other weather-related weapons.

Because such ENMOD weapons mimic natural phenomena — in fact, they are natural phenomena merely triggered by human acts — their victims literally won't know what hit them. Bedraggled refugees from floods in Pakistan, starving drought victims in West Africa... are they just unfortunates who have been singled out by circumstance, or casualties in a silent, secret global struggle?

Knowing that the superpowers are studying and developing weather weapons must make every human being suspicious and fearful. Is the environment being manipulated for the economic or political advantage of some special-interest group when a blizzard or flood or drought or hurricane appears? Who owns clouds anyway? Who has the right to tamper with the weather? If we really are on the brink of a new ice age, what should we, both as individuals

and as a society, do to prepare ourselves for its coming?

In the days when only God was responsible for the weather, nobody considered these problems. But even God posed similar questions. To Job, He asked: "Hath the rain a father? And who hath begotten the drops of dew?"

Job couldn't answer; neither can we. But we know that a lot of people besides God have been experimenting with the weather over the past 15 years or so. And our weather lately has been getting positively ungodly. □

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nant, the McCallie yearbook, shows an average-looking, humorless-appearing man in his blue school uniform. He was listed in no extracurricular activities. "His grades were very poor," another teacher recalled. "He was pleasant, not a discipline problem, not rebellious or in any difficulty except academic."

Stoner transferred to Chattanooga's public "City" High School, but he did not graduate. His grades remained poor, his manner shy and uncommunicative. "He didn't talk about politics or race then," remembered one of his classmates, Warren Gardner. "He didn't talk

about anything that I can recall."

On May 28, 1940, the *Chattanooga Times* reported that 16-year-old Stoner had been mentioned on a shortwave broadcast aired the preceding night by "Lord Haw Haw," the British traitor who made radio broadcasts for Nazi Germany during World War II. (It should be pointed out that the United States had not yet entered the war. Pearl Harbor was more than a year away.) The story quoted Stoner as admitting that he had corresponded with Iowan Fred Kaltenbach, a Nazi sympathizer who also broadcast on Berlin shortwave. "I am not in sympathy with the German cause. I am against Hitlerism," Stoner told the Chattanooga paper. "My only reason [for writing Kaltenbach] was in the hope that a German doctor might be able to cure me. I've heard that German doctors are the best in the world."

"Young Mr. Stoner, you are a brave lad," Lord Haw Haw replied on the air. "I will try to see to it that you get the services of a German doctor when the war is over."

When the war ended, William Joyce, alias Lord Haw Haw, was hanged for treason. The teenage cripple he had promised to help was emulating Lord Haw Haw's master.

In 1946, as the 20-year-old Führer of his own "Stoner Christian Anti-Jewish Party," the high-school dropout proposed to an Atlanta newspaper reporter that being a Jew "be a crime punishable by death. It may sound a little extreme, but other countries have done it." His countrymen had just learned of Dachau and Buchenwald.

Stoner began his extremist career at 18 when he unexpectedly surfaced as an organizer for a now-defunct branch of the Ku Klux Klan around Chattanooga. His career didn't last long; he was too radical for his hooded brothers. In an interview 30 years later he allowed that the Klan was too "moderate" for him.

Moderate? "Well, a lot of your Klansmen don't mind having niggers around in a servant situation. I want 'em all shipped out." As far as Stoner is concerned, even Adolf Hitler was not aggressive enough in the cause of racial purity. "He didn't have anywhere near the race problem we've got, and if you ask me, I think Hitler did us dirty by letting all those Jews come over here."

A former associate of Stoner contends the Klan, which is extremely anti-Semitic, became nervous at the attention Stoner's philosophy was drawing. "They don't like that kind of notoriety, the kind he was getting," said Stoner's ex-cohort. "They would rather stay under

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the scum where they generally stay. Notoriety attracts attention; so who needs it? But J.B. kind of thrived on all that. He has an ego problem."

Stoner showed up in Atlanta in the early Fifties, living at a downtown YMCA while attending law school at night. He graduated in 1952. During his law-school days Stoner often visited a practicing lawyer with whom he had more in common than just law. Attorney James Venable is also Grand Dragon of the National Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. "He impressed me as having a shrewd, quick mind," said Venable. Even then Stoner wore his hair cropped short, and he sported bow ties, traits that have become his trademarks.

Stoner's law practice consisted mostly of divorce and other domestic cases, which earned him his bread and butter. But he was always looking for "white patriots" he could defend — Klansmen and others charged with violent, race-related crimes.

It was in the early Fifties that Stoner launched the National States Rights Party, along with Dr. Edward R. Fields, a chiropractor who once said he was inspired by the gallus-snapping, segregationist speeches of Georgia Governor

Gene Talmadge in the Forties.

Stoner moved his residence and party headquarters several times before settling, in 1971, in Marietta, a blue-collar town north of Atlanta near Lockheed's big Georgia plant. He was on the road constantly, popping up at racial trouble spots during the turbulent Sixties — Birmingham, St. Augustine, Bogalusa.

So was the FBI. Stoner hates the Bureau almost as much as he does Jews and blacks. But ironically, though the "Federal Bureau of Integration" has a file on Stoner big enough to fill a shopping cart — he once rolled a cart containing 1,400 pages of Bureau documents he obtained under the Freedom of Information Act into a court hearing — the FBI has never made a case against him. A 1966 memo from the FBI office in Savannah, Georgia, where Stoner then lived, to J. Edgar Hoover named Stoner as a suspect in a half-dozen dynamitings of black churches, synagogues and integrated schools in Birmingham, Nashville, Jacksonville, Atlanta, and Clinton, Tennessee. "He apparently would not actually commit the bombings, but he would have planned them and put them into execution," the memo stated.

That same year an investigator for the House Un-American Activities Committee told them that Stoner lectured a Birmingham rally of his racist party on

bomb-making in July 1963, two months prior to the Sixteenth Street Church tragedy. But circumstantial evidence — even a shopping-cartful — does not make a case. Though often a suspect, Stoner has only been prosecuted once.

Not a drop of blood was shed when a dynamite bomb exploded early on the morning of June 29, 1958, in the parking lot of Birmingham's Bethel Baptist Church. But former Alabama Attorney General William Baxley, who had conducted a personal crusade to solve his state's unsolved church bombings and who considered Stoner a symbol of anti-black violence, was positive he could nail Stoner on this one.

Whatever the strength of Baxley's case, his target has evaded extradition to Alabama for trial for more than two years. As of this writing Stoner has appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court the state supreme-court ruling upholding his extradition. He called the entire prosecution a publicity stunt by "that nigger-lovin' Bill Baxley" to win black votes in his 1978 race for governor. Stoner was gleeful when Baxley lost.

Baxley's successor, Charles Graddick, has said he will prosecute Stoner if Georgia ever "sends him over here." Alabama's case rests largely on the testimony of two undercover agents, or "FBI pimps" as Stoner calls them. They are Tom Cook, a retired Birmingham police lieutenant, and William Hugh Morris, an elderly Ku Klux Klansman. Cook and Morris, who headed a police intelligence team that spied on white-supremacy and civil-rights groups alike, refuse to detail what they know, although Morris says it "will not be very helpful to Stoner."

Stoner is waging his own counter-offensive against Cook and Morris. He says the pair offered him \$2,000 to bomb the Bethel Church, a civil-rights headquarters, and that he played along with the scheme to "expose" them.

He has leveled an even graver charge against Morris. He told the House Assassinations Committee that Morris offered him \$25,000 in 1958 to hire a sniper to shoot Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Morris denied the allegation. "I don't have that kind of money, and I wouldn't know where to get it," Morris said. "If I had wanted it done, I would certainly have sought out somebody with more intelligence than J.B. Stoner."

The committee concluded that Morris was not involved in the King assassination. Nor Stoner for that matter.

The Alabama-bombing charge has put a crimp in Stoner's travel plans. While Baxley was in office, Stoner never set foot outside Georgia for fear his

nemesis would have him subpoenaed. Jerry Ray, James Earl Ray's younger brother, recalled that Baxley spoiled one of Stoner's few recreations, his periodic trips to Florida to catch the winter sun. Things have eased up now, but Stoner still stays out of Alabama.

Ray was a night watchman at a Chicago-area country club. Like his brother James, he had a record of run-ins with the law. He began his relationship with Stoner when James Earl Ray accepted the lawyer's offer to defend him after King's assassination. Ray changed defense lawyers often, and he dropped Stoner within months. But brother Jerry kept up the relationship.

For 10 years, off and on, Jerry maintained the grounds at Stoner's red-brick party headquarters in Marietta, collected Stoner's mail, took care of the guard dogs (a pair of German shepherds named Trixie and Polo, and not, as some neighbors believed, Nigger and Shalom), acted as Stoner's general "gofer" and helped distribute the party newspaper, the *Thunderbolt*.

This lurid tabloid prints stories of black crimes and Jewish greed "suppressed by the daily press," often by reprinting selectively edited articles lifted from more ordinary papers. Stoner refuses to reveal its paid circulation; the Anti-Defamation League, which keeps tabs on such things, estimates around 15,000 paid subscribers nationally.

Jerry Ray, while certainly not uncomfortable with Stoner's views, lacks the obsessive virulence of his boss. "I don't pay that stuff much attention," said Jerry. "I just look at me and Stoner as being personal friends. He's done a lot for me. Every time the FBI's harassed me out of a job because of James, I can come here."

Perhaps because of the bombing indictment in Alabama, perhaps because 1978 was a cooled-off political year, Stoner lost ground in his latest race, a run at incumbent Governor George Busbee. Stoner's vote shrank from more than 73,000 (9.3 percent of the total) four years earlier when he ran for lieutenant governor, to fewer than 36,000, or 5.3 percent.

But those diminished numbers did not reflect diminished emotions over his campaign message. Every Stoner campaign has had an uproar over the candidate's radio and television ads, which he pays for handsomely with money collected mostly from out-of-state contributors. The ads are simple. Stoner, seated in a TV studio, squints into the camera and says in a rapid monotone: "The reason niggers want integration is because niggers want our white women."

(Stoner has never married. Early in his racist career he reportedly told an interviewer, "Any woman would be too dumb for me.") The Federal Communications Commission has consistently turned down angry and anguished appeals to ban Stoner from the air on the grounds that, except in clear danger of immediate violence, diatribes about "niggers," however reprehensible, are legitimate political comments. For that matter, respectable Southern politicians have said much the same thing in less obnoxious terms for years.

State Senator Julian Bond, however, almost turned the tables two years ago. Bond, president of the Atlanta NAACP, fired off a telegram to the FCC. "The word [nigger] is offensive and obscene to at least one-fourth of Georgia's population and quite probably the others as well," Bond wired. If the FCC would not end Stoner's air pollution, Bond said, he would be forced to buy air time and find some candidate who, during the family hour, would be willing to say *mother-fucker*, *cocksucker* and the rest of the FCC's forbidden "seven dirty words."

Bond never followed through with his threat. Had he done so, given the marvelous variety and occasional perversity of Georgia politicians, the possibilities would have been mind-boggling. □

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