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"Street naming is where ideology meets asphalt." Dr. Alderman, author of No Easy Road

Where streets are placed, what they are called, how they are used, when they come into existence, and who ultimately decides all of this – these things all matter.

Why? Because street names are extensions of belief.

They are also political expressions. When you name a street in honor of a Judge, Senator, or Mayor, you are making a political statement... and it rarely matters if the general public agrees with, sanctions, or even knows what that message is.

For example, the street name "Caraway" was likely put in place to honor Hattie Caraway, the first woman to preside over the Senate. Her name, her accomplishments, her beliefs... she is given a prominent place in our daily lives. We shop with her. We travel to work, to school, to church with her. We take her places. Her name is in our mouths and on our minds more often than we notice. Her name has social, political, and cultural prominence in our lives.

That's why it's so important for folks to know that Hattie Caraway also voted against anti-lynching legislation. Twice. Two times, Caraway had the opportunity to do the right thing and two times she failed. Hattie Caraway effectively sanctioned racialized terror, mass abuse, and murder. Now, we can't be sure if she did this because she was politically weak – a pushover - or because she was a horrible human being. It doesn't matter why she failed to do the right thing; the fact is she failed and her failure to do the right thing hurt people.

Johnson Avenue is another example. Now, some say that it was named in honor of JM Johnson, a bigtime businessman from back in the late 1800s, early 1900s. Truth is, the "evidence" that Johnson was named after JM is a little shaky. But, let's pretend that's true. That would mean that JM Johnson was arguably one of the richest and most influential white men in Jonesboro. No doubt he had his hand in politics. No doubt he and his friends employed most of the town and held clout with the white community at large in Jonesboro. No doubt he was an influential member of a local church.

And, if all of this is true, and if it is true that Johnson, Ave. was named after JM Johnson (the businessman), then we have a very important question to ask: where was the richest, most powerful, most influential white man in Jonesboro on the night on December 26, 1920 and why didn't he lift a finger to stop the lynch mob that murdered Wade Thomas? Maybe he was part of the mob or maybe he sanctioned the lynching; after all, it happened right over there on the corner of Main and Monroe, just a few steps from JM Johnson's front door. No doubt, he could see the whole thing.

But who's to say Johnson was named after JM Johnson? After all, most streets in honor of people are in honor of politicians – senators, judges, and mayors. As it turns out, the man who sanctioned the lynch mob's murder that fateful night was a judge by the name of RE Lee Johnson. A judge who failed in his duty to uphold the law and protect a US citizen. It is just as likely that Johnson was named after Judge RE Lee Johnson... another white person who had the chance to do what's right and failed.

I guess what I'm saying is history is weird. 1000 years from now, none of this will be here. I'll be dead. You'll be dead. There will be nothing left of us but the stories. 100 years from now, people will be digging up those stories just like we are today. What we know now about the past is iffy... we haven't always been very good at keeping up with the facts of history... some better than others, of course. But

boy are we good at it now. There will be no question, no debate, and no escape for your legacies – not today and not 100 years from now. Political expediency will not protect you in the pages of the histories your great grandchildren read in school any more than it will protect you from the reality of the thousands of people you will hurt with your politics today.

I'm not sure what a win looks like here. For me it's very simple: there is a promise and it's long overdue, the community asked for Johnson Avenue and they were bullied and bullied until they gave up and asked for Commerce... I think you should scrap the whole thing and just unanimously vote to give the people what they asked for in the first place: Johnson Avenue renamed MLK Avenue... but, barring that absolute miracle, I can confidently say that if you do not deliver at least Commerce in total to the people, you will be remembered for it. Just like Hattie Caraway, the infamous white supremacy sympathizer.