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Reply

Charles G. Gomillion

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Reply

March 7, 1959

The Southerner
Member of a Branch of a White Citizens Council
Lake Charles, Louisiana
Author of the letter to Charles G. Gomillion,
Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama;
Postmarked February 26, 1959

Dear Sir:

Thank you for the very informative letter which you sent me. It happens that I was not at home when it was delivered. Please pardon my delay in responding. Some of the delay is due to my uncertainty as to whom or where to send the reply. I regret that in your effort to enlighten me you neglected to identify yourself by name or address. This failure makes it impossible for me to send you a personal and private reply, which I should like to do. Since this is not possible, I think that it is courteous that I endeavor to have it published, in the hope that you will discover that your effort was not in vain.

I regret that you underestimate your importance. Who you are is important. Your behavior affects many persons, even me. Because you are important, and because my well-being, directly or indirectly, is affected by your conception of yourself and of your relation to others, I hope that you will consider how important you are.

You are more than "a southerner from Lake Charles, Louisiana"; you are an American, I presume, and one who has probably read the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution of the United States of America. It is quite likely, also, that you have pledged allegiance to the Flag of the United States, our Homeland. I am inclined to believe that at some time in the past you have professed to believe in the concept of democracy, the principle of equality of opportunity. I am inclined to believe, further, that basically you are a "good American," because you have chosen (1) to inform me of your affiliation, and

of your intention, (2) to warn me of impending danger, and (3) to advise me as to what I should do. For this I am grateful.

Congratulations on your reading *CORONET*, which magazine frequently contains important articles. Unfortunately, however, the title of the article which you read, "The Integration Fight is Killing Tuskegee," is misleading. If Tuskegee is being killed, it is not being killed by the "integration fight." If it is being killed, might it not be by short-sighted, narrowminded, and undemocratic public officials and citizens who deprive some American citizens of civic rights and opportunities by refusing to register them, and by gerrymandering a city? Those in favor of integration did not reduce the size of the city, nor did they propose to abolish a county. They do not seek to destroy the integrity and the prestige of an historic municipality; they try to build its resources, enhance its prestige, and make it a model for democratic living and progress.

By this time, I hope that you have recovered from your illness. I regret that you were made "sick" by me and my ideals. Whenever I am responsible for the illness of anyone, I am unhappy.

I am sorry that you have decided not to speak to the Negroes whom you have known "because of what their race is trying to pull." Is it fair to them? Have they mistreated you? Have you asked them whether or not they are in favor of what you think "their race is trying to pull"? I regret even more your development of the capacity to "hate." Hatred is both expensive and dangerous. It takes time and effort to hate. And when one is hating, he cannot be loving. When he is acting on hatred, he cannot be engaged in noble efforts. Persons who hate are unhappy persons. Many of them are afraid, and fear is dangerous. Many persons who are afraid find it difficult to resist the temptation to engage in vice or crime. Love is much more satisfying, and honorable, than hatred. Please examine your present emotional content, and see if you might not want to talk with your one-time "fairly good" Negro friends. If you listen to them, and objectively examine their civic status and opportunities, you might discover in them something which you admire. If you discover in them nothing which elicits your respect, you would rise to the challenge if you would decide to meet and work with them in an effort to help them become worthy of your respect, and possibly of your love. If you do not think of yourself "as better than a negro," then you can afford to do this.

I am glad that you believe "in the negro having everything I have." If by "everything" you mean the civic status and opportunities to which you have access, that is exactly what Negroes are working for. When you are willing for "the negro" to have everything you have "just as long as he stays on his side of the fence," you write as if you and he are not in the same field. You and he are living in the United States of America one nation, indivisible. Where is the fence that divides? How can the Negro stay on "his side of the fence" if he

does not see any fence, and if the Federal Government does not recognize the existence of any fence?

There are many implications which can be drawn from your statement that you "don't want to see intermarriage between a colored man and white women." Polygyny is not legal in the United States. Do you mean to imply that there is the possibility that two or more white women might become the wives of a colored man? Or do you mean to imply that intermarriage between a white man and a colored woman would meet with your approval? Or that you are not interested in what the white woman might think about the extra-marital relations of the white man and the colored woman? Since no man is able to marry a woman if she says "No," do you imply that there are some white women who could not, or would not say "no"? Does your statement suggest that there are some white women whose judgment you do not trust? In the United States, is not legal marriage between healthy persons considered more honorable, and more in keeping with the moral code of our culture, than illegal extra-marital relations?

You err when you say that my associates and I are "fighting." We are not "fighting." We are simply working hard to be good, productive Americans. We are trying diligently to get the same kind of education you and your associates want so that we may be able to make contributions to the culture which are comparable to those which you and your associates make. We do not want to fight; we want to learn and earn. We do not want to shed blood; we want to maintain the peace. We regret that you threaten to shed blood.

It happens that I cannot answer your question as to whether or not "damn Yankees love niggers." I have never asked anyone I know whether or not he loved me. Those whom I know seem to love justice, fair play, the Golden Rule, and recognize and respect the rights of their fellow Americans. I do know that they have allowed me many more opportunities to develop my mind and my cultural interests and competencies than have Southern white Confederates.

As for leaving the South, I am not interested. I was born in the South, and attended the public elementary school in my native state, South Carolina. Although the educational opportunities in the county in which I lived were grossly inferior to those provided for white youth, as reported by white citizens, I did have the opportunity to read the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution of the United States, and I believed what I read. I believed that I was a full citizen of this Nation, and that this was a land of opportunity, where the law-abiding and the industrious could prosper. I believed, also, that it was the duty of every American citizen to contribute constructively to the development of his Fatherland. I have spent my past years studying the arts of peace, not the science of war. Professionally, I have sought to enlighten and heal the minds of youth and men, not to poison them. My mission is to shed light, not blood, and I hope

that I may be permitted to shed it in the South before the more martial-minded shed blood. Because I believe firmly that those who live by the sword shall perish by the sword. I am not now prepared "to fight anywhere, any sort of way." I am a worker, not a fighter.

As sincere as I think you are, I hope that the United States Supreme Court will not take your suggestion to "go to hell." To "go to hell" would be cowardly. There is too much work yet to be done in America. The Supreme Court in some of its recent decisions has been merely trying to implement the American value of equality of opportunity, and to rectify the unfortunate decision of the 1896 Court. The present Court now knows that if Western Civilization is to survive, it will need contributions from citizens who have developed themselves to the optimum, and this can be done only when opportunities are unrestricted. We can either work cooperatively and honorably, and try to compete successfully with undemocratic opponents, or we can waste our resources, efforts, and time, and wait for subjugation. What is your choice?

I hope that if you have read this letter you will accept it in the spirit in which it is written. It is not my desire to offend. I do not threaten you. I am sorry that you hate me. I do not hate you. This might not be of any value to you, but it makes me feel good. I can sleep at night, and I can study and work during the day. I do not have to plan courses of action designed to shed blood. I am a student, eager to learn, and would appreciate an opportunity to meet and confer with you. Those who really know me say that I am gentle, kind, and generous. I invite you and your associates to meet with my associates and me in friendly fellowship. You might discover that we are good Americans. If you observe that we are un-American, you could have us arrested and imprisoned Don't kill us! Don't shed our blood! Let the constituted legal authorities do that.

Very truly yours,

Charles G. Gomillion
Box 31
Tuskegee Institute, Alabama