Still chasing the shadow of Rodney Monroe

L. Douglas Wilder's political legacy as Richmond mayor — he had a tumultuous four-year term after becoming the first elected at-large mayor following the city's shift 18 years ago to a strong mayor form of government — was cemented shortly after taking office in January of 2005. With a modicum of fanfare, Wilder hired a little-known police chief in Macon, Georgia, to replace the recently departed Andre Parker. In a city reeling from a spike in homicides and violence, Rodney Monroe was Wilder's first significant hire. The decision turned out to be a good one.

Monroe took over as Richmond's police chief that February. Some thought he was in over his head — Macon had just 16 homicides in 2004; Richmond had 95 — but almost immediately the city embraced the affable police chief, a streetwise, blue-collar cop with an empathetic touch that belied his gruff exterior. Monroe grew up in Washington, D.C., and later Prince George's County, Maryland, where he learned to box at Palmer Park Gym alongside a then-unknown Sugar Ray Leonard. He also brought big-city policing experience: 22 years in D.C.'s toughest districts, where he once brokered a truce between rival gangs at the notorious Benning Terrace public housing complex.

Before taking office, Wilder had put together a search committee made up of local business executives and civic leaders to find Richmond's next police chief.

"Our committee was overwhelmed by him," recalled the committee's chair, Jim Cherry, who was at the time chief executive of the Mid-Atlantic region for Wachovia Bank. Cherry, now retired and living in North Carolina, remembers how Monroe showed up in Richmond a few days prior to the

interview. He asked a taxi driver to take him to the city's toughest neighborhoods.

"When he came and met with us, he described what he had seen," including unkempt streets, abandoned cars and no visible police presence, Cherry said. "He then started talking about community policing. Clean them up, get police presence in these areas either by stationing them or putting in little satellite places. … None of the [other candidates] came with a plan. Rodney Monroe did."

As the city prepares to search for its next police chief following the departure of Gerald Smith, who resigned on Oct. 25 after a 27-month tenure riddled with controversy, Monroe's shadow still looms large over Richmond. Monroe only served as police chief for three years, from 2005-2008, before leaving to take over as chief of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department. But his impact was enormous.

Monroe instilled a community policing philosophy in Richmond that involved computerized mapping of crime incidents and breaking the precincts into a dozen sectors, assigning officers to work the same beats at the same times to increase community familiarity. Police began hosting regular neighborhood meetings, soliciting community input and incorporating localized crime prevention strategies.

In his last full year as chief, 2007, homicides had dropped to 55; and for the next eight years the annual count hovered in the low 40s. Monroe and Wilder pushed hard to increase the department's officer ranks to get more patrols and officers in high-crime neighborhoods. The former chief accrued so much political capital that once, during a City Council budget work session, he received a standing ovation *after* requesting an additional $3.6 million in funding.

“Monroe really came in with a level of confidence and experience — and a great personality. He knew how to be engaged with residents,” recalled City Councilwoman Ellen Robertson, who had just been elected to her first full term on Council in 2004. “People really got engaged. They really understood the mission. They also knew the strategies. Everyone was singing from the same sheet.”

Since he left, however, Richmond has been unable to replicate that Monroe magic. The city has burned through six police chiefs since then, with varying degrees of success. Three of them — Ray Tarasovic, Alfred Durham and Gerald Smith — had direct ties to Monroe, either through D.C. or Charlotte, but none rose to community and political prominence quite like their predecessor.

Perhaps too much has time has passed. The city’s summer of protest following the police killing of George Floyd, which led to frequent clashes between protestors and police in Richmond and across the country, may have permanently altered the relationship. Calls to “defund the police” after Floyd’s death, along with the heightened attention to police brutality, didn’t exist in 2005.

Policing has changed in other ways. In the 1990s and early 2000s, inner-city drug markets were responsible for much of the bloodshed. Today, a social media dispute is as likely to lead to gun violence as a turf dispute between rival drug gangs. And as cities across the country struggle to recruit new officers, true community policing is difficult, if not impossible.

Richmond, for instance, has north of 150 officer vacancies, says Brendan Leavy, president of the Richmond Coalition of Police: “You can only do so much. It’s very hard to do

community policing when you have a shortage of that magnitude."

Robertson, who now serves as City Council vice president, says Monroe created a blueprint for how community policing is supposed to work. "Monroe proved to us that it can be done," she said. When the Stoney administration begins the search for the next police chief — currently, veteran Maj. Richard Edwards is serving as acting chief — Monroe should remain top of mind.

"When we go out to do that search, someone with that level of knowledge and experience is going to be fundamental to our success," she said. "We have the template. We have the model."

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Our collective indifference to gun violence is no accident

A week has now passed since three University of Virginia football players were eulogized and honored in a memorial service at John Paul Jones Arena in Charlottesville. The candlelight vigils have come and gone, along with what must have been a wrenching Thanksgiving holiday for the families of Devin Chandler, Lavel Davis Jr. and D'Sean Perry, who were senselessly gunned down on a charter bus Nov. 13 after returning from a trip to Washington, D.C., to see a play about Emmett Till.

More gun violence has already supplanted Chandler, Davis and Perry from the headlines. A shooting at an LGTBQ nightclub Nov. 19 in Colorado Springs, Colo., left five dead. Two days before Thanksgiving, a shift manager at a Chesapeake Walmart allegedly opened fire in a breakroom,

killing six co-workers and then himself. Sooner rather than later, of course, the cycle will repeat.

As the bodies pile up, our collective indifference will continue.

It's easy to see why. Emotionally processing so many senseless killings is nearly impossible. We find ways to compartmentalize, gravitating to the easy answers: the assailants suffered from mental health issues, our red flag laws failed to produce actionable warning signs, the guns used were too easily accessible. All of those things are usually true. But so is this: Our compartmentalization often leads us to dehumanize the assailants, and often the victims themselves.

Take, for instance, Chandler, Davis and Perry — and their alleged assailant, Christopher Jones. Imagine if those same young Black men were gunned down in the streets of Richmond or Petersburg? In, say, Mosby Court or Essex Village, where Jones grew up as a child? What if the victims weren't rising football stars, or an academic standout like Jones, at the state's most prestigious state university?

"Those three guys, if they had been in Whitcomb or Mosby, would have been just one more kid," says the Rev. Ben Campbell, pastoral associate at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, who has spent a lifetime fighting for social justice in Richmond. "Now, they are on the UVa football team and their whole humanity is recognized. We count or discount people depending on their social status, and often that means their racial status."

It wasn't just that Chandler, Davis and Perry were gunned down on a college campus. They were young Black men who appeared to have escaped the social entrapment of being young Black men. Jones, the alleged shooter, had

reportedly fought off his demons — a broken family, anger management issues as a young child and teenager — to become an academic star. He wasn't given a scholarship to play football. He excelled in the classroom. He had somehow slipped the vice of entrenched poverty.

Unlike the victims, Jones' humanity has yet to be recognized. He's been cast as the monster, the troubled youngster from the rough streets of Richmond and Petersburg whose heart was filled with anger. But that's the compartmentalization. No one is born with violent intentions, points out the Rev. Don Coleman, a lifelong Richmonder and pastor of the East End Fellowship. Having grown up in Creighton Court, he knows all too well that even those who make it out carry deep scars.

"If he's a monster, we created this monster," he says, "because the roots of this place are rooted in violence."

That we, collectively, continue to ignore the depths of multigenerational, institutionalized poverty — starting with slavery, then Jim Crow, segregationist redlining, interstate construction and a criminal justice system specifically designed to keep Blacks from fully integrating into broader society — is central to the recurring theme. Our schools may no longer be segregated. Denying job opportunities or mortgages based on one's skin color are no longer legal. We are a diverse society. Even our gun violence appears to have become more diverse.

But that's a mirage. The overwhelming majority of gun-related homicide victims in America are Black. Across the state in 2021, 68% of all homicide victims were Black, an increase from 66% in 2020. From 2016-2020, Black people made up 60.5% of all homicide victims. It's getting worse.

And much of that gun violence can be traced back to those same violent roots — from the depths of a system designed to keep Black families confined to neighborhoods where gun violence, and entrenched poverty, are normative. Until we collectively recognize our responsibility to break this pattern, Coleman says, the bodies will continue to pile up. We have to be able to see the inhumanity.

"As a spiritual person, the answer is we don't see the imago Dei of every human being," Coleman says. It started with the very foundation of this country, which failed to recognize the human worth of enslaved African Americans. And it continues.

"It was birthed out of the idea that certain humans are better than other humans," Coleman explains. "And that's the scary part of this: It is still deep in our psyche."

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In Virginia, Spanberger's star is rising

Organizing meet-and-greets for Abigail Spanberger in the spring of 2018, Mary Jo Sheeley recalls being struck by how the political newcomer worked a room. She'd make a point of greeting as many people as humanly possible, says Sheeley, a Richmond-based attorney and political activist who was volunteering as an events coordinator at the time.

Sheeley couldn't quite put her finger on it, but there was something different about Spanberger. Her one-on-one encounters weren't the handshake-and-pass variety, but decidedly more intimate. People would leave the meetings feeling like they *knew* Spanberger.

“You know, when they are talking to you, they are focused on you,” Sheeley tries to explain. “People just feel heard by her.”

Four years ago, the political climate still felt newly unstable, adjusting to the toxicity of then-President Donald Trump. Spanberger was a wide-eyed Democratic hopeful running in a district that had been held by Republicans for 50 years — the Congressional 7th, which was occupied by tea party favorite Dave Brat. Spanberger wound up winning in 2018 by over-performing in the western suburbs of Chesterfield and Henrico counties, and limiting in her losses in the old 7th’s rural counties.

She squeaked by with a 1.9-point victory. It was an unexpected pickup for the Democrats, one many political analysts chocked up to virulent anti-Trump sentiment and massive turnout by suburban women. But then she did it again in 2020, edging Republican Nick Freitas by 1.8 points. In this year’s newly drawn 7th District, which shifted out of Central Virginia into Northern Virginia after redistricting in late December, she doubled her previous margins and defeated Republican Yesli Vega by 4.6 points.

She did so with a well-funded campaign and an army of grassroots volunteers, defying what most prognosticators predicted would be a red wave in Virginia and across the country.

“Spanberger just turns out to be a superstar candidate,” says longtime political analyst Bob Holsworth, who says Spanberger’s mix of fundraising prowess and retail skills set her apart. “Every campaign is so impressive. She raises money. She has clear messages. She works hard.”

Most importantly, the centrist Spanberger brings a kinetic energy to state politics. She preaches bipartisanship, connects with voters and manages to balance the progressive forces within her own party against the hard-right tendencies of more rural voters in her district — without alienating either.

The former CIA officer also isn't afraid to throw a punch. She famously lashed out at House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the chamber's more progressive Democrats during a private meeting after the 2020 election, warning that the left wing's "defund the police" messaging and embrace of the socialist label nearly cost them the majority.

"If we are classifying Tuesday as a success from a congressional standpoint, we will get f---ing torn apart in 2022," she said.

In September, she took aim at Gov. Glenn Youngkin and his plan to roll back protections for transgender students in public schools during a private meeting with the governor and members of Virginia's congressional delegation. In one exchange, she forcefully reprimanded U.S. Rep. Bob Good, who claimed that "grooming" was responsible for suicides among transgender youth. "That's not f---ing true," Spanberger fired back.

In hyper-partisan Washington, Democrats with moderate leanings and an unwillingness to dive into the gutter of identity politics run the risk of getting run over. Spanberger, however, is proving to be a force. Turns out she has a nice left hook.

For a Virginia Democratic Party that has struggled to produce compelling statewide candidates (see Terry McAuliffe) Spanberger just might be the antidote.

“If you are looking for a gubernatorial candidate in 2025, now you have someone who has won in Richmond/RVA and has won in Northern Virginia; who is youthful, energetic,” Holsworth says. “If Democrats are thinking who can win statewide, Spanberger’s name has to be in the mix.”

Clarence Dunnaville, a longtime civil rights attorney who now lives in Midlothian, couldn’t agree more. Dunnaville, 89, worked with Richmond civil rights icon Oliver Hill in the 1990s, and once got chased by a shotgun-wielding sheriff’s deputy in Mississippi while working to protect voting rights for African Americans in 1967. He saw it, too.

“I think there is something about her,” says Dunnaville, who has campaigned and helped raise funds on Spanberger’s behalf in all three of her elections. If the Democrats are looking for a winner in the 2025 governor’s race, he says, they don’t have to look far.

“I mentioned that to somebody the other day,” he says, adding that Spanberger would have to be at the top of the list of potential gubernatorial candidates. “I said my ideal candidate would be — bring *her* back home.”