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Chief Judge Carl Stewart

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Growing up, he was forced to attend segregated schools, required to use “colored only” restrooms and water fountains, and made to sit at the back of the bus. At age 3, Stewart watched as white church leaders blocked his parents’ efforts to buy their first home because they didn’t want black people as neighbors. Retail stores refused to let him try on clothes. Customers at his first job in college routinely used the N-word in front of him.

He quietly admits that he continues to experience racial profiling, even today.

But in the eyes of many, those experiences make Stewart the perfect person to preside over the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals—one of the most controversial, rancorous, dysfunctional, staunchly conservative and important appellate courts in the country.

It is also a court with three current vacancies—President Barack Obama has announced one nomination to fill one of those slots—and there’s a strong possibility the president will have three more openings before he leaves office, leading many to predict a radical ideological change is in store.

Stewart, 64, is the first African-American chief judge of the 5th Circuit. He serves on the powerful federal Judicial Conference, is vice president of the prestigious American Inns of Court and, until recently, chaired the Federal Rules Committee. There is scant dispute that this quiet, amiable lawyer from northern Louisiana is one of the most influential federal judges in the nation.

As for the bitterness and racism that has surrounded him over the decades?

“Sticks and stones,” he quickly interjects, even before the question is fully asked.

“I don’t see why so many people even today are so bitter or always picking fights over politics or race or whatever and I refuse to play their game,” says Stewart. “People who constantly cause conflict and stress, those are unhappy people.”

The New Orleans-based 5th Circuit, which fields its appellate cases from Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, tests Stewart’s dislike for conflict as a matter of routine. The court has before it now, or in the pipeline in the district courts below it, cases challenging gun laws, restrictions on abortions, organized prayer in public schools, affirmative action efforts by local governments, challenges under the Voting Rights Act, opposition to federal environmental regulations and enforcement efforts, disputes about the implementation of the death penalty and renewed challenges to Obamacare, not to mention review of the varied and massive BP oil spill litigations.

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