

## Interview with Congressman Louis Stokes



Louis Stokes was elected to Congress in 1968 on his first attempt for public office. Former Congressman Stokes became the first African American from Ohio to be elected as a Member of Congress and proceeded to serve fifteen consecutive terms in the United States House of Representatives. Mr. Stokes retired in 1999 having completed 30 consecutive years of service within the U.S. Congress. Mr. Stokes was the first African American to achieve this milestone time span of service.

He is currently Senior Counsel at Squire, Sanders and Dempsey, a law firm based in Washington, D.C. He is a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.

Current honors for Mr. Stokes include the inaugural Pillar of Justice Award from the Federal Bar Association, Northern District of Ohio Chapter. The American Bar Association Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession conferred upon Mr. Stokes the 2010 Spirit of Excellence Award to recognize his work promoting opportunities in the legal profession to all minorities. At the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic site, Mr. Stokes and his brother Carl were inducted into the International Civil Rights Walk of Fame in 2011.

Katelyn: In general, can you describe how Carl Stokes' election as mayor became a turning point in black political history?

Mr. Stokes: I think this is evident in several respects. First, his election was that of being the first African American mayor of a major American city. Cleveland, at that time, was the eighth largest city in the United States with a population in excess of 800,000 people and it was a city that was only 37 percent black. It meant that black people alone could not have elected a Carl Stokes. He was able to do something that the nation had never seen before. He put together blacks, whites, Hispanics and other ethnic groups in a coalition in order to be able to get elected and become mayor of Cleveland. Since Cleveland was only 37% black, the black population alone could not have elected him even if 99% of black people voted for him. So, he knew that he had to win at least 15% of the white vote, much of which was on the west side. He was able to get the 15 percent that he needed with the coalition that he put together. With this process, he was able to achieve the feat of becoming the first black mayor of a major American city. That was a turning point for the nation.

He was then able, as the mayor of our city, to do something that white mayors had never done. And that was to put intelligent, well educated black people in cabinet positions. This city had never had a black in a cabinet position. And he was able to find and produce a number of them although he had whites and blacks in his cabinet. But that was a turning point for the city; to see black people in these positions along with a black mayor. Even then, he appointed a black law director for the first time. And then, he was also able to put black people into positions within city hall that had previously never had black candidates. The treasurer, for instance, and other key appointees were black appointments for the first time.

It was a turning point from the viewpoint that nationally the whole nation was looking at what was occurring in Cleveland. Blacks in other cities who were aspiring to public office began saying that, if a Carl Stokes can get elected as mayor of Cleveland, I can get elected as mayor of Philadelphia, Chicago, New York or Los Angeles. And indeed, many of them came to Cleveland to find out how he did it. And then immediately after his election, we saw blacks become mayors of all those major cities I just mentioned. Other major cities that were even larger than Cleveland and actually the top three cities or so in the nation as New York followed, then Atlanta. All of this became a turning point in America because of the election of Carl Stokes in Cleveland.

Katelyn: Do you think that this helped with the major conflicts occurring at that time?

Joan: Like the Hough riots, do you think that helped calm down this discord now that black citizens had a voice in their city government?

Mr. Stokes: Well, unfortunately a lot of people thought the election of a Carl Stokes in Cleveland provided an insurance policy that there would be no further riots or unrest in the city. And, that was a mistake for people to think that. Even as we look at the current situation, the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States does not end racism in America.

And while this is an enormous feat for which you have to give our nation credit, they were able rise above the racism in our nation and elect a qualified black man the president of the greatest nation in the world. It didn't make America become a panacea for a lack of racist activities. So, Carl Stokes was in the same position. He could not stop the unrest that was occurring. One of the programs that he got the business community to give him was the Cleveland NOW program and to add millions of dollars into the program. And Carl attempted to utilize that funding to help social work groups and others involved in community groups. However, part of the money that was given to a small group in the Hough area, they took the money and purchased guns instead of spending the money to carry out their intended programs. So following that, we had additional rioting in the Hough area. So no, he was no an insurance policy in that sense.

Katelyn: So that could bring us to what were some of the triumphs and tragedies of his term and results of his decisions?

Joan: We know that Mayor Stokes went into his term very focused on fixing the major housing issues, the environmental issues and starting the Cleveland NOW program. How much progress resulted from these focal points?

Mr. Stokes: Well, he took a great deal of pride in dealing with the housing issue. But he had a lot of opposition there. He tried to create new public housing in the Lee Harvard area. And the blacks who had come from public housing and moved out to this area contested this and they were successful. They fought public housing being placed in their neighborhood. But he was successful initiating the first new public housing in Cleveland in fifty years. This was in the Central area, the Hough area and similar Cleveland neighborhoods. He took pride in these accomplishments. He created jobs for people which were never held by minorities.

In the area of health, he had accomplishments there by working with hospital authorities. But he needed money. A major problem was that how could you run a city without money. What honor is it to preside over a city that is bankrupt? And the city would not pass his legislation for an income tax increase. And so that is why, after two terms, he said that is it for me.

Joan: Ultimately, the impact of his election, while we know it brought a lot of national media attention, how do you think, historical context wise, it affected the nation?

Mr. Stokes: Well, perhaps President Barack Obama expresses it best. He was here for the funeral services of Congresswoman Stephanie Tubbs Jones. And at her funeral service, while I was at the podium speaking, he was at that time a candidate. Just elected as the new Democratic nominee for president, he was on the stage with Hillary Clinton, Bill Clinton and other prominent national figures. I started out my remarks talking about the fact of how proud I was to have him on the podium knowing that he was the first African American in our history to be nominated for the presidency of the United States. And I commented at the time, I think I was 82 or 83 years of age, I just turned 88, I commented that was my age and I said that this was something that I hoped would occur. I thought that while our nation was capable of electing a qualified black to be president of this country, I did not think I would see this in my life time. Well the audience started applauding and standing to applaud.

I turned around and those near the podium were standing up too. Barack Obama came over and we hugged one another. And he said to me "I'm here, because of you and your brother." It will always be something I cherish, those words from him. Acknowledging that Carl was the one who broke the ice in our country, as he was the one who showed qualified black Americans were capable of holding the highest office in the land. I recall that when Carl was mayor, there was talk of him running as vice president of the United States. Now they couldn't raise it to president (*laughter*) but they talked seriously about him as a vice presidential running mate.

When you look within the context of those who became mayors or held other public high office in America as a result of his election here, he was a pioneer in showing that this could be done.

Then I think that is the sense in which history will have to put his election. It was a turning point for the nation in terms of political achievement.

Katelyn: Which events, such as the Hough riots and other barriers, affected plans from his original election day? We know that it was even difficult to even rally support to gain serious consideration to become mayor. Subsequently, what else affected what he wanted to realize?

Joan: In context of the city politics, what forces made it difficult to advance his initiatives?

Mr. Stokes: Even though he was elected mayor, he was fighting his city council that was predominantly a white city council. Where in terms of the west side politicians, it was in their best interests to show opposition to this black mayor. And actually they could be racist in the ways they would treat him and respond to him. So he had to fight against that. And at that time in the city, he did not have the funding for the things that he wanted to do. In order to change conditions in our city, he needed money. Some money came from the federal government but it was not sufficient in order to do what we wanted to for the city.

Katelyn: So how did, beginning with your law firm that you created with brother Carl Stokes, this process invoke the drive within your brother to want to achieve what he eventually did accomplish?

Mr. Stokes: Yes, we had a law firm together but Carl spent his time in politics rather than primarily at the law firm. I was the one to keep the doors of the law firm open because he spent all of his time, or his spare time, with politics and running for office. He knew where he wanted to go and knew how to get there. Of course he started with his first election to the Ohio state legislature. And it doing that he became a pioneer. He was the first black democrat to ever be elected to the Ohio state legislature. That was pioneering and a turning point from the perspective that he actually ran county wide and was elected county wide. No black had been able to do that before. That was the first place in which he got an opportunity to really go to Columbus and advocate on behalf of minorities, the poor for domestic programs for inner cities and programs of that nature. Then he took that same programmatic mentality into the mayor's office with him.

Joan: In thinking of the aftermath of his election, what do you see in the reactions of the white population in the city and surrounding suburbs plus the key white politicians in the area?

Mr. Stokes: Yes, we had a real mixture of reactions. There were many, many liberal whites who were really proud to be a part of this election that produced America's first black mayor. They were proud of their city in the same way that Americans were of the country upon electing Barack Obama. This is in keeping with everything our nation believes in and advocates. Then there were those just like today who hate that Barack Obama was elected and they would do everything they could to prohibit his reelection as president. Barack Obama's reelection was

more about his being able to have the American people certify the first election so that it would not appear as a blip on America's political historic scene.

Not everyone was jubilant or accepting that Carl Stokes was the mayor of our city.

Joan: For instance, we spoke with Mr. Norman Krumholz. We are not sure if you know of him. He was the city planning director at the time.

Mr. Stokes: Yes, one of Carl's appointees.

Joan: Yes, he was honored to be working with such an historic political figure.

Mr. Stokes: Norm Krumholz had done a fantastic job in his capacity with the city. He is one of the national experts in community planning.

Katelyn: Can you address the groundwork that Carl Stokes laid early on? What steps did he take to make his election a possibility?

Mr. Stokes: You have to look at Carl himself. He was a natural politician. He had the women's vote as women loved him. He was handsome and all of that. (*laughter*) He got a lot of attention from women but he was articulate. He was a great speaker and, of course, academically he had prepared himself as a lawyer. But he also took stands and spoke out in a way that people had never seen a black politician do. All of that drew attention to him and he was confident enough to believe that he could be a state representative or even the mayor or I'm not sure whatever ambitions he may have had.

Katelyn: Finally, what were the immediate and then lasting impacts of his election? Is there anything else you would like to add to how he turned the nation in terms of electing black candidates to such positions in higher office in government?

Mr. Stokes: I think that in addition to his election, he fought the Democratic Party of Cuyahoga County. He made them more responsive to the minorities who were the basic support of the Democratic Party within Cuyahoga County. He was highly respected nationwide in particularly in the Congress. The Congress members often wanted to see if they could get Mayor Stokes to go to Washington D.C. to talk about any type of legislation that affected the cities such as the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act or transportation matters. He was frequently called upon by Congress to testify before various committees. Those are just a few of his numerous legacies as mayor.