

TWO BROTHERS

Mayor and Congressman

Editor's Note: Louis Stokes (right) became the first African American to represent Ohio in the House of Representatives when he took office in 1969. His thirty years in Congress might not have happened but for his brother (left) Carl. Before running for the House, Louis was a prominent attorney and civil rights activist in Cleveland. On the evening of November 7, 1967, his brother Carl became the first African-American mayor of Cleveland, defeating Seth Taft by a mere 1,700 votes. That election changed everything. Before then, the brothers practiced law in the successful firm of Stokes, Stokes, Character, Terry, Perry, Whitehead, Young, and Davidson. As one law partner after another took jobs as judges and commissioners and mayors following Carl's victory, Louis began to seriously consider his own future. In this excerpt from his 2016 autobiography, *The Gentleman from Ohio*, Louis Stokes recounts the night his brother became mayor of Cleveland and the subsequent election fallout for the family.



On election night I was in the offices of Carl's campaign headquarters in the Rockefeller Building with Carl and his circle of people. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Reverend Ralph Abernathy had joined us there as we watched the vote count come in. All the newspapers and pundits had said the race was going to be neck and neck, but as the night went on Taft took a lead that looked like it might be insurmountable. The last wave of votes, though, would be coming in from the black wards. The tension was almost unbearable. Then, a little before three o'clock in the morning, the official tally was announced. Carl had won by 1,700 votes.

That moment delirium struck. What had happened was historic; we all knew it. We felt it. Down outside the building the streets were suddenly thronged with people literally dancing for joy. We could hear the shouting for Carl to come down. People were overcome with happiness, laughing, some of them crying. Everyone wanted to see him.

Carl told me that he, his campaign manager — Dr. Ken Clement — and the others were going to go down. But would I please stay here in the offices with Dr. King? Which meant that Dr. King was not going to be with him on the podium when he gave his victory speech. I was sure they had decided that together. This was an immense victory for black people. Nothing like it had ever happened before in American history. But Carl wanted the symbolism to be clear; this mayor's race was not a civil rights struggle, it

was the campaign of someone who deserved the office because of his qualifications. Carl was the new mayor of all of Cleveland's people, not just the city's black citizens. So he went down to give his speech, and I sat upstairs with Dr. King.

While Carl and his entourage went off to face the delirious crowds, Dr. King and I sat together, talking about what Carl's victory meant to the country and how proud he was to see Carl achieve this, what it meant to have this kind of political progress as we marched forward for full equality. He said that along with political equality we had to do what every other ethnic group that has acquired parity in this society had done: we had to achieve economic equality. "No ethnic group," he said, "has been able to achieve parity here without both political and economic equality."

I did go downstairs a little later. Superior Avenue was still crowded with people

celebrating. Somebody ran up to me, a man I knew from the neighborhood.

"Lou! Lou! Do you know what this means to me!"

"Tell me, what does it mean?"

"It means that for the first time in my life I can tell my son he can be anybody he wants to be."

Carl's victory wasn't just national news, it was international news. His picture was on the covers of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and a dozen other American and foreign publications. America had elected its first black mayor of a major city. It was a stunning event. The civil rights movement had been burning for more than a decade, bringing with it terrible tragedies as well as historic victories. Carl's election was a huge triumph; it seemed like a sign, maybe a turning point. Cleveland had been the scene of such angry racial conflict, and if Cleveland could achieve this who knew what the future might hold in store? Carl was being seen as a pioneer of black political progress. Serious people were already starting to talk about the possibility of running Carl as the vice presidential candidate.

I felt immense pride in Carl, that he was the mayor, and that he was my brother. But meanwhile I was back at Stokes, Stokes, Character, Terry, Perry, Young, and Davidson hoping to continue building my own dream. But I was facing headwinds. Carl Character, an outstanding trial attorney who was heading up our civil litigation department, was appointed to a judgeship in the Court of Common Pleas. James Terry,

Carl Stokes and his wife Shirley outside a voting booth on Election Day 1967.
Cleveland State University, Michael Schwartz Library, Special Collections



an expert in transportation law, became the transportation commissioner for Saint Louis, Missouri. Samuel Perry was elected the mayor of Woodmere, a little town just outside Cleveland. We were losing people right and left. And now Carl was gone as well.

I began to sense that Carl's election was going to create changes in my life, too, whether I wanted it or not. Once Carl became mayor people started trying to get to me since they

couldn't get to him directly, the idea being that if they got to me, whatever their problem or request was would also get to him. One morning I was in my office preparing for a murder case, when a lady called. I answered the phone, and she asked for Carl Stokes. I explained that he had now been elected mayor, so he was no longer a member of the firm. "I'm his brother. Is there anything I can do for you?" "Well, these people out here have shut off my gas." "They shut off your gas?" "Yes."

"Madam, let me ask you a question. Have you paid your gas bill?"

"That ain't got nothin' to do with it. Mr. Stokes isn't going to let them cut off my gas!"

That was how he was perceived. Notwithstanding whether or not she had paid her bill, Carl Stokes was not going to let anybody cut off her gas, and I was supposed to get him the message.

Two months after the mayoral election the Supreme Court issued its verdict in *Lucas v. Rhodes*, mandating the integrity of the Twenty-First District. I called Carl

and told him we had just been advised that the case was remanded and the district court was instructed to redraw along constitutional and contiguous lines. "This means you can go to Congress," I told him.

"Go to Congress?" he said. "I'm mayor of Cleveland!"

I began laughing. Suddenly Carl no longer had any interest in going to Congress. He was the mayor, blazing a trail in America's political life.

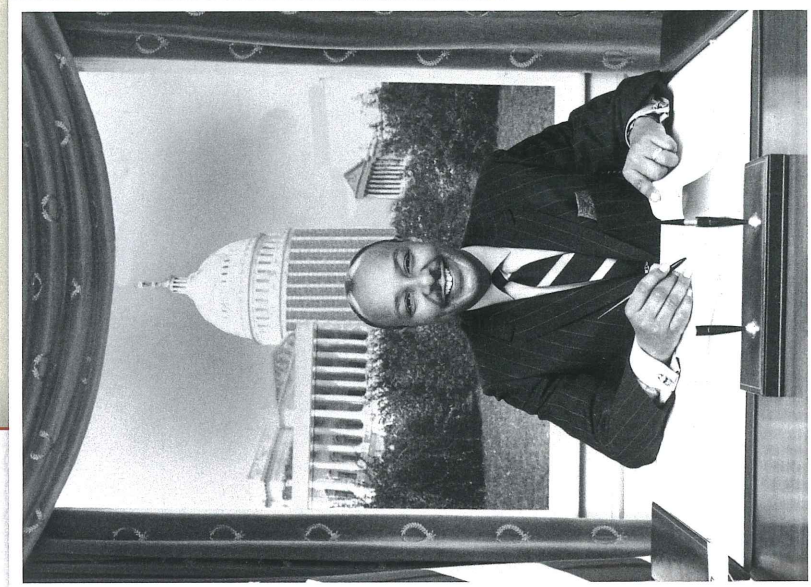
When word got out that even though we had won his case Carl was no longer interested, it seemed that almost every politician in town decided that this was his time to go to Congress. Most of them knew that I had absolutely no interest in a political career, so they didn't think I would run. And even if I did run, they were veteran politicians. I was no politician at all, so they wouldn't have to worry about any candidacy on my part.

They weren't wrong. I was perfectly content with practicing the law. I was in some judge's courtroom every day trying a case. As far as I was concerned, that was the way I wanted to spend the rest of my life. I intended to pursue my career and rebuild the firm, a big challenge now that we had lost so many people. So that was where I stood, watching the scramble and the emerging strong men: George Forbes, Leo Jackson, and George White, each of them an experienced, elected black official with high visibility in the community.

Those of us on the executive board of the Cleveland NAACP branch were in the habit of getting together for breakfast

On November 7, 1967, Carl Stokes was elected the fifty-first mayor of Cleveland. As the first African-American mayor of a major metropolitan city in the United States, his election opened doors for others during the 1970s. Stokes went on to become the first African-American local news anchor in New York City, the chief counsel to Cleveland's United Auto Workers, and a Cleveland municipal judge. *Cleveland* Press photographers were on hand for Carl's (right rear) mayoral inauguration. Carl's wife and children, along with his brother Louis (second from left), joined the new mayor on the platform. *Cleveland State University, Michael Schwartz Library, Special Collections*





Louis Stokes served in the US Army during World War II. Earning a law degree in 1953 from the Cleveland Marshall Law School, he argued a case before the US Supreme Court in 1968. The next year, Stokes was elected to the US House of Representatives and served until retiring in 1999. His congressional work included participating in the assassination investigation of the murders of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., but he was proudest of his work on minority health care. Congressman Stokes took every opportunity to “ask question after question about black people — at a time when [representatives] weren’t thinking about black people at all.” An unsuccessful bid for president lost out to Bill Clinton in 1992. Retiring in 2012, Louis Stokes died three years later. *Cleveland State University, Michael Schwartz Library, Special Collections*

on Sunday mornings to talk about problems in the community. As the district’s political situation was heating up, our discussion one morning centered around the different individuals who were announcing they were going to run.

As the discussion continued someone said, “Well, none of them had anything to do with the suit that created the district. You did, Lou. You ought to consider running yourself.”

“No,” I said, “I’m not really interested.”

“Well, it should be either you or Dr. Clement.”

Dr. Kenneth Clement was a renowned black physician who was highly respected in both the black and white communities, a professor of surgery at Case Western Reserve Medical School and very active in black community issues. He had been Carl’s campaign manager. He was sitting in at breakfast with us.

The discussion continued about either me or Dr. Clement — Kenny to all of us — running.

I said, “Well, I’d certainly yield to Kenny. Kenny, if this is something you want to do, I don’t have any problem with it. I’ll step aside.”

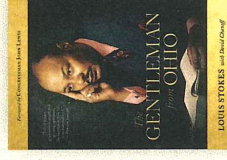
Someone finally said, “We need to go see Carl, let him help us decide whether Kenny or Lou should run.”

Clement and Carl were very close, although they had a falling out later. Clement had run Carl’s two mayoral campaigns. So even though he was a distinguished surgeon, politics was in his blood.

My own political relationship with Carl, as I’ve explained, was fairly simple.

I occasionally appeared for him at some meeting or other if he was unable to make it, the theory being that if Carl couldn’t be there, people’s disappointment would be assuaged if at least his brother came. That was basically it.

But as we headed over to Carl’s house I was thinking hard about this turn of events. I didn’t have any political ambitions; I never had had any. On the other hand, whoever was elected here was going to be the first black Ohioan ever to serve in Congress. Carl’s election was historic; this was going to be historic, too. It began to dawn on me that as much as I loved the law, this would be a higher calling to reach for. I didn’t know exactly how many blacks were serving in Congress, maybe four or five — anyway, a very small handful. What a challenge it would be to join them, and what an opportunity. All of a sudden I found myself completely caught up in the moment. And I started thinking about what it might mean for Shelley and Angie and Chuck and Lori to be the children of a US Congressman. Maybe this is something I would want to do after all. I started thinking, Why not? ¶



From *The Gentleman from Ohio: Louis Stokes* by Louis Stokes with David Chanoff. Copyright 2016 by Trillium Imprint. Reprinted by permission of the Ohio State University Press.