

The Election That Changed Cleveland Forever

By Michael D. Roberts

That autumn in Cleveland was crisp and colorful with low clouds, high expectations and an anxious electorate. With the season, came the wonder whether the city could look beyond race and elect a black man as its mayor. It had never been done in a major American city. The world wondered whether it could be done.

By 1967, race had been the dominant issue in Cleveland since the beginning of the decade, first with demonstrations against what minorities considered a segregated school system, and then with a riot that left four dead and required the Ohio National Guard to quell four days of looting and violence.

In the wake of the Hough riot in the summer of 1966, an ominous apprehension settled over the city. Those venturing to the eastern parts of the town did so warily for sporadic gunfire was a common occurrence. A policeman had been ambushed in his zone car and killed. A black student was murdered near Murray Hill.

Downtown, the business community grew apprehensive. For years, the city had ignored the quality of life among the growing black population, which had migrated here from the south to work at jobs created by three wars. The housing was dilapidated, the schools inadequate, and the future bleak.

The anger created by these conditions was manifested in the demonstrations and finally in the riot.

In the midst of the turmoil, the emerging black political figure was Carl B. Stokes, a lawyer who had grown up in poverty, and had worked as a liquor agent and then was elected to the Ohio state legislature. Stokes ran for mayor in 1965 and met narrow defeat at the hand of incumbent Mayor Ralph Locher.

Locher was one of a long line of mayors who rose from the neighborhoods and represented the ethnic politics that had bound the city for two decades. The hallmark of ethnic politics was a numbing status quo that rendered the city somnambulate.

All was not well as the city prepared for the 1967 mayor's race in which Locher would try to retain his office and once again face the charismatic Stokes and his growing number of East Side followers who registered to vote in multitudes.

The last minute appearance of Stokes in the 1967 Democratic primary was a change from the strategy that saw him run as an independent in the 1965 election. Several other veteran politicians measured their chances in the primary and opted out with the exception of Frank Celeste, who had made a name for himself as the mayor of Lakewood.

The Locher administration found itself embattled following the 1965 election. A failing urban renewal program and the riot had attracted the attention of a national media that had become so critical that Locher refused to speak with out of town reporters.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development called Cleveland the Vietnam of urban renewal and ceased funding the city's program. The local media piled on to criticize the Locher administration with acid regularity, bemoaning a city hall that had seemingly lost its course

Conversely, the appearance of Stokes in the primary attracted the attention of not only the national media, but the international as well. As the primary campaign shifted into gear, it was clear that Stokes was becoming a political persona of some dimension.

And finally, when *The Plain Dealer* endorsed his candidacy in a surprising editorial, Stokes in his own words was legitimized. That attention magnified when he defeated Locher in the primary by 18,231 votes.

Now the stage was set for one of the most dramatic and interesting mayoral races in Cleveland history. It would feature Stokes against Republican Seth Taft whose political heritage included a U.S. president, William Howard Taft, and a U.S. Senator, Robert Taft.

Seth Taft was a lawyer in a prominent Cleveland law firm, and was an ardent supporter of regional government. He did not match up well with Stokes when it came to personality or oratory skills. No one questioned his honesty, competency and dedication, but he was a suburban interloper from Pepper Pike.

What Taft needed most was name recognition in the city. He had to position himself as close to Stokes as he could in order to challenge his opponent's knowledge of the Cleveland and the government that ran it. Taft was a student of government process.

He also was a decided underdog as an early poll showed him getting only 16.4% of the vote in a race with Stokes who could expect 49.2%. Of those polled, the rest were undecided or said they would not vote.

At the heart of both campaigns was a series of debates that would showcase the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates. Taft wanted debates on specific issues, but Stokes wanted a more free-wheeling approach, which would emphasize his oratory skills.

But lurking behind any topic that a debate might feature, was the factor of race. Robert Bennett, who was Taft's campaign manager, remembers a meeting in which the candidate told the staff that he would not tolerate the use of race in any aspect of his campaign.

The Stokes campaign made the same vow, but the circumstances involved, and the historic nature of the event, made the approach different. It had to make white voters think beyond the color of the candidate's skin---to the man himself.

Both candidates needed the debates to legitimize them as potential leaders and gain the support of the business community, the grassroots and perhaps most of all, the newspapers. The debates would be the proving ground for attracting the necessary support to win.

The Stokes victory over Locher had a transcendent effect on his campaign for now the weight of the Democratic Party, which had been reluctant to embrace him, unified with a mighty rally at Public Music Hall which sent an ominous warning to the Taft camp.

In the wake of the spirited moment, the candidates agreed on four debates with the last being the traditional City Club confrontation that generally was considered the final argument in Cleveland mayoral contests.

Meanwhile, the ranks of visiting journalists were swelling with arrivals from Germany, Holland, Italy, England and elsewhere. They descended on their local counterparts, searching for insights into the race like soothsayers studying tea leaves.

The fall was electric with anticipation and excitement. There was never anything like it in recent memory and media covered every machination in the campaign, including the baby elephant that the Taft camp had hired to tout its candidate.

The first debate was held on the black East Side at Alexander Hamilton Junior High School, which Taft selected to thrust himself into the midst of Stokes country. The evening was unseasonably hot as the two met for their first duel. The auditorium was full and the debate was broadcast to an estimated 100,000 television viewers.

The media had cloaked the confrontation in drama, and the evening took on the allure of a sporting event.

But for all the tense expectation, the night turned out to be a bust for Taft, who was no match for the elusive Stokes who dodged and weaved through the debate as the boxer he once was. Stokes painted Taft as an intruder in Cleveland, a "carpetbagger" from Pepper Pike, which he contrasted to embattled Hough. He noted repeatedly that Taft lived in a house with seven bedrooms.

Taft responded weakly, noting that Carl Stokes had no programs designed to meet the growing urban problems. Later, Taft acknowledged to his staff that the debate had been a disaster for him.

And then, two nights later, in the second debate on the white West Side at John Marshall High School, Carl Stokes, basking in triumph, made a mistake that would suck the momentum from his campaign. It showed how combustible the race issue was.

Taft did so poorly in the first debate that he had attracted a sympathetic following that viewed Stokes as being arrogant and overbearing to his opponent. That was the background on which the miscalculation played out.

The white West Side crowd at the second debate was disposed to Taft, especially when he opened with a condemnation of Stokes, citing his arrogance, belligerence and bravado. The audience responded with cheers and applause.

When Stokes took the podium and proceeded to ridicule Taft for living in a mansion in Pepper Pike, he was roundly taunted to the point that the crowd interrupted his prepared speech. And then he made the mistake that made the campaign a neck and neck race.

“I am going to be brutally frank with you---and brutally frank with Seth Taft, Stokes said. “...Seth Taft may win the November 7th election for only one reason. That reason is that his skin happens to be white.”

The remark had the effect of a bomb. The auditorium reverberated with noise and anger as the crowd hollered in protest. Taft sat dumbfounded, stunned that his opponent would open up himself to the race issue in such a blatant manner.

And then, in what would be the best moment of his campaign, Taft rose and said: “It seems that the race issue is with us. If I say something on the subject it is racism. If Carl Stokes says something it is fair play.”

With that, Taft held up a full page newspaper ad for Carl Stokes. In huge type was the crying pronouncement:

*DON'T VOTE FOR A NEGRO, vote for a man. Let's do Cleveland Proud!
What has Cleveland done that makes us so proud? Nominated a Negro for mayor!
Do yourself proud by electing one.*

The reaction to the introduction of the race issue was so vehement that Stokes' campaign manager, Dr. Kenneth Clement, was quoted as saying that he wished there was a third candidate that he could vote for. He predicted that if his candidate continued to dedicate his campaign to race he would lose.

The following day results of the Stokes blunder began to flow into Taft headquarters in the form of money and pledges of support, which energized the campaign staff in a way no other event could. The problem was that the polls still reflected poorly on the Taft effort.

Taft began to chide Stokes, telling voters and reporters that people were beginning to see through the guile and charm the candidate brandished to find the man had no substance. He accused Stokes of avoiding him at neighborhood meetings.

A third debate, held downtown at St. John's College on Thursday, October 19, proved to be so uninspiring that it received little or no news coverage.

Carl Stokes was not only facing Taft in the race, he began to struggle against the indifference of key supporters like the Democratic Party and labor which offered lip service but in the campaign trenches did little. Racism was at work like an unseen gas it wafted through the city.

Taft was beginning to annoy Stokes, who had a temper that when unchecked appeared to alter his personality. Taft's continuous harassment, that his opponent had no real program or agenda for city hall, was beginning to bother Stokes both emotionally and politically. The once insurmountable lead that he held over Taft was eroding.

The planned final debate was the traditional City Club meeting which took place the Saturday before the election. That was too late. Taft needed another shot at the wounded Stokes. He needed another debate.

Both candidates sensed the need for an extra debate, but for different reasons. Taft needed recognition as a legitimate candidate and Stokes had to show that he had the intellectual wherewithal to bring change and performance to city hall. They agreed to the extra debate which turned out to be as anticlimactic as yesterday's newspaper.

The candidates needled each other on Saturday, October 28, at the Music Hall an afternoon when most of the television audience was watching Notre Dame lose to Michigan State in an important football game for the national championship ranking.

On top of that, the debate was less than newsworthy, a tedious recitation of tired charges and overused rebuttals. But there was a noticeable change in the manner in which Stokes carried himself.

As the race began to conclude Stokes was trying a different strategy. He was toning down his style, hoping to appear more reflective and above the brawling rhetoric that had marked his entry into the campaign. His earlier reference to race had been a calculated effort to get the issue out in the open early. Now his advisers feared that Taft supporters, outside of the official campaign, were employing whispering tactics and using race against Stokes.

On the first of November, a Wednesday, *The Plain Dealer* published a poll with stunning results. It showed Stokes receiving 50.14% of the vote and Taft, 49.86%. Taft had gained substantially, and with the election just six days off, the

final debate at the City Club loomed as large as any that had taken place in the citadel of free speech, as the club bills itself.

That Saturday, November fourth, the debate was held at the Hotel-Sheraton Cleveland (now the Renaissance Cleveland Hotel) to take advantage of its spacious ballroom. Taft came out aggressively calling his opponent an absentee Democrat, an absentee legislator and implying that he would become an absentee mayor as well.

Stokes, his emotions in check, carefully outlined his plans as mayor and stuck to his prepared text, ignoring Taft's barbs. The Stokes camp was tense, for every time the candidate wandered from carefully prepared remarks, he got himself in trouble. This time he persevered and delivered the last major blow of the campaign.

The very last question that Taft presented to Stokes was a reference to his less than stellar attendance record in the legislature. Stokes paused for a moment and then reached into his pocket and withdrew a letter and read it.

"The reports I hear of your performance in Columbus are excellent and I congratulate you on the job."

It was signed by Seth Taft.

Three days later Carl Stokes was elected the mayor of the City of Cleveland by a vote of 129,396 to 127,717. The count went well into the early morning hours and only in the end was it clear that Stokes was the winner. He garnered only 15% of the white vote but it was enough to tip the election his way.

Afterwards, the two opponents had a private meeting and cleared the air of the animosity that had accumulated during the campaign.

Meanwhile, as that November hardened into winter, a sense of decency and pride descended like gentle snow upon the town. The election of Carl Stokes was one of the most triumphant moments in Cleveland history and a major national civil rights achievement. The town deserved to be proud as did the world.

Michael D. Roberts was a Plain Dealer reporter in 1967 and covered the entire Stokes-Taft campaign. At the conclusion of the race he wrote a lengthy account of the race with the reporting of William C. Barnard and James M. Naughton. The newspaper recognized the historical moment and devoted resources and an enormous amount of space in its Sunday Magazine on December 10, 1967. [The original Sunday Magazine piece is here](#)