

## Carl B. Stokes

Carl Burton Stokes is one of a handful of African Americans to have served in all three branches of government.

Although he was a good student, Stokes was attracted to the street life around him and became proficient at shooting pool. He dropped out of East Technical High School and when he turned 18, joined the Army, serving in postwar Germany. Upon his return from the military, he completed high school in 1947 and spent a year at West Virginia State College. He later attended Western Reserve University and finally received his bachelor's degree at the University of Minnesota. The passion for excellence Stokes demonstrated in the political world was foreshadowed earlier in athletics. In boxing, he won the West Virginia State College Middleweight Championship in 1948. He also won the University of Minnesota Billiard Championship in 1953.



He returned to Cleveland in 1954 and earned his law degree at Cleveland Marshall Law School in 1956. He worked as an investigator for the Ohio Department of Liquor Control and as a probation officer at Cleveland Municipal Court until he graduated and passed the bar. He established himself in private practice.

In 1962, he became the first black Democrat elected to the Ohio House. During his first term, Stokes was named the top freshman in the legislature. He served six years in which he was known for the passage of fair housing legislation and as an advocate of gun control. In 1965, he made his first run for mayor but lost a close race to incumbent Mayor Ralph J. Locher. Two years later in 1967, he defeated Locher in the primary and went on to beat Republican Seth Taft. The 1967 election was quite a story. Stokes was the great-grandson of a slave, running against Seth Taft, the grandson of a president. The victory put him on the cover of *Time Magazine*. He was re-elected in 1969. Stokes surprised the community when he announced in 1971 that he would not run again. He said he did not believe he would be able to bring about further change in the community. Years later, he explained that he gave up the post in reaction to massive cutbacks in federal support for cities. He wrote many articles on urban and political affairs. His autobiography, *Promises of Power*, was published in 1973. An updated version was released in 1989.

The spring after he left City Hall, Stokes became an anchorman on NBC's flagship station, WNBC-TV in New York City. He later became a roving reporter. In addition to doing local stories, he often interviewed prominent visitors to the United Nations and traveled on assignments to Africa. He won an Emmy from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for outstanding individual craft in feature reporting for a discussion of a Broadway play based on the life of the late Paul Robeson.

Stokes returned to Cleveland in 1980 and worked as a labor lawyer for three years. His clients included two regions of the United Auto Workers. He was elected as a municipal judge in 1983. He was the first freshman judge selected to serve as the presiding and administrative judge of the court. He held those posts for two of his years on the bench. In addition to his judicial duties, he taught a political science class at Case Western Reserve University for four years.

Stokes' term on the bench was not without controversy. He frequently angered the very judges who took a leap of faith to elect him Administrative/Presiding judge in his first year on the bench. The initial dispute began between Stokes and the Jury Commissioner over

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seating juries on Fridays, a situation routinely avoided in municipal court at that time.

Stokes also clashed with the staff of the Legal Aid Society over their representation of prostitutes. It was his position that professional prostitutes did not qualify for indigent representation. The situation escalated when he barred a Legal Aid attorney from his courtroom. He later held the Legal Aid Director in contempt of court. The society responded with a filing in the court of appeals. As the litigation progressed, Stokes dropped the contempt charge. The appellate court however, ruled to prohibit Stokes from controlling the courtroom assignments of Legal Aid attorneys, or whom they were represented.

Stokes' behavior in the community also resulted in legal trouble. He was accused of shoplifting a screwdriver from a home-improvement store, as well as a bag of dry dog food from a Shaker Heights pet store. Although there was no prosecution, Stokes made a voluntary \$50 restitution for the \$2.39 screwdriver. With regard to the pet store incident, Stokes was charged with and tried for petty theft. Stokes demanded a jury trial in Shaker Heights Municipal Court; the court closed the jury selection to the media, which touched off a dispute between the court and *The Plain Dealer*. The trial spanned 4 days. Testimony during the trial established that on the day of the alleged theft, Stokes visited the store 3 times, the first before 9 am. He was told the store was not open that early; nonetheless, he took his dog food and left, without being noticed. Although he returned to the store twice more during the day, he made no offer of payment. Apparently the jury accepted his explanation that he meant to pay the \$17.25 for the dog food. They acquitted him after 2 hours and 20 minutes of deliberation.

Lastly, Stokes chose to take on Clerk of Court Jerome F. Krakowski with contempt of court charges. Stokes accused Krakowski of circulating a letter impugning the integrity of the court and ignoring his orders to explain the letter and misplacement of court files. The letter in question accused an unnamed judge (presumed to be Stokes) of attempting to intimidate clerk employees. Later, the offices of the clerk were broken into, the suspect being a court employee, who had been seen in conference with Stokes during the Krakowski hearings. Krakowski attributed Stokes behavior to a desire to run for mayor, with Stokes making preemptory moves to eliminate possible competitors. Ultimately, neither man entered a mayoral race.

In 1994, President Clinton appointed Stokes Ambassador to the Seychelles Islands in the Indian Ocean. In 1995, after he was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus, he took a medical leave of absence. He endured radiation treatments and chemotherapy in addition to surgery to remove a tumor.

Despite all the treatments, Stokes died from complications of esophageal cancer in 1996 at the age of 68.

Carl B. Stokes served Cleveland Municipal Court from December 9, 1983 to August 28, 1994.