



# Louis Stokes

## 1925–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1969–1999  
DEMOCRAT FROM OHIO

Louis Stokes rose from the local housing projects to serve 30 years in the U.S. House, becoming a potent symbol for his Cleveland-based majority-black district. Reluctant to enter the political arena, Stokes was persuaded to run for office by his prominent brother and by community members he had served for decades as a civil rights lawyer. His accomplishments were substantive and of historic proportions. The first black to represent Ohio, Stokes chaired several congressional committees (including the Permanent Select Intelligence Committee) and was the first African American to win a seat on the powerful House Appropriations Committee. He used his success to try to increase opportunities for millions of African Americans, saying, “I’m going to keep on denouncing the inequities of this system, but I’m going to work within it. To go outside the system would be to deny myself—to deny my own existence. I’ve beaten the system. I’ve proved it can be done—so have a lot of others.” Stokes continued, “But the problem is that a black man has to be extra special to win in this system. Why should you have to be a super black to get someplace? That’s what’s wrong in the society. The ordinary black man doesn’t have the same chance as the ordinary white man does.”<sup>1</sup>

Louis Stokes was born on February 23, 1925, in Cleveland, Ohio, to Charles and Louise Cinthy (Stone) Stokes.<sup>2</sup> His father worked in a laundromat and died when Louis was young. Stokes and his younger brother, Carl, were raised by their widowed mother, whose salary as a domestic was supplemented by welfare payments. The boys’ maternal grandmother played a prominent role, tending to the children while their mother cleaned homes in wealthy white suburbs far from downtown Cleveland. Years later, Louise Stokes recalled that she had tried to instill in her children “the idea that work with your hands is the hard way of doing things. I told them over and over

to learn to use their heads.”<sup>3</sup> Louis Stokes supplemented the family income by shining shoes around the Cleveland projects and clerking at an Army/Navy store. He attended Cleveland’s public schools and served as a personnel specialist in the U.S. Army from 1943 to 1946. Much of his tour of duty was spent in the segregated South, driving home for Stokes the basic inequities facing blacks—even those who wore their country’s uniform.<sup>4</sup> He returned home with an honorable discharge, taking jobs in the Veterans Administration and Treasury Department offices in Cleveland while attending college at night with the help of the GI Bill. He attended the Cleveland College of Western Reserve University from 1946 to 1948. Stokes eventually earned a J.D. from the Cleveland Marshall School of Law in 1953 and, with his brother, opened the law firm Stokes and Stokes. On August 21, 1960, Louis Stokes married Jeanette (Jay) Francis, and they raised four children: Shelly, Louis C., Angela, and Lorene.

Initially, Louis Stokes harbored few, if any, ambitions for elective office. He devoted himself to his law practice, where he became involved in a number of civil rights-related cases—often working pro bono on behalf of poor clients and activists. He was an active participant in civic affairs, joining the Cleveland chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the board of the Cleveland and Cuyahoga bar associations, and the Ohio State Bar Association’s criminal justice committee, where he served as chairman.<sup>5</sup> He eventually served as vice president of the NAACP’s Cleveland chapter and chaired its legal redress committee for five years. His brother, Carl, pursued a high-profile career in elective office, serving two terms in the Ohio legislature, and in 1967, he won election as mayor of Cleveland, becoming the first black to lead a major U.S. city. “For a long time, I had very little interest in politics,”



Louis Stokes recalled. “Carl was the politician in the family and I left politics to him.”<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, Louis Stokes enjoyed a growing reputation as a prominent Cleveland attorney. Working on behalf of the Cleveland NAACP, Stokes helped challenge the Ohio legislature’s redistricting in 1965 that followed the Supreme Court’s “one man, one vote” decision. The state legislature had fragmented the congressional districts that overlay Cleveland, diluting black voting strength. Stokes joined forces with Charles Lucas, a black Republican, to challenge that action. They lost their case in U.S. District Court, but based on Stokes’s written appeal, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed with the brief in 1967. From that decision followed the creation of Ohio’s first majority-black district.<sup>7</sup> Later that year, in December 1967, Stokes made an oral argument before the U.S. Supreme Court in *Terry v. Ohio*, a precedent-setting case that defined the legality of police search and seizure procedures.<sup>8</sup>

At his brother Carl’s behest Louis Stokes made his first run for elective office in 1968. He sought to win the seat in the newly created congressional district that encompassed much of the east side of Cleveland—including Garfield Heights and Newburgh Heights—where African Americans accounted for 65 percent of the population. Stokes was hardly a typical newcomer to the political campaign. First, his brother, Mayor Stokes, put the services of his political network at Louis’s disposal. “I ran my brother Louis,” Carl Stokes recalled, “and put behind him all the machinery that just elected me mayor.”<sup>9</sup> With Carl’s help, Louis cofounded the Twenty-First Congressional District Caucus—a political organization that would serve as his base throughout his long congressional career. It provided the supporters, volunteers, and organizational structure that sustained Stokes in the absence of support of the local Democratic machine; it was a loyal cadre that would do everything, from stuffing envelopes and knocking on doors to holding an annual picnic that became a highlight of the community’s annual calendar. The caucus fulfilled Stokes’s twin representational goals: to develop black political power in Cleveland and to inspire black pride among his constituents.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Louis

Stokes’s credentials within the black community were sterling. He won two vital endorsements: the support of the *Call & Post*, the influential local black newspaper, and the backing of the vast majority of the local church ministers in the new district.

Stokes perceived the election as a barometer of the way newly enfranchised and empowered blacks would organize their political clout—less an expression of black pride than an experiment in creating a power base outside the Democratic Party, which in many urban areas represented a competing rather than a supportive entity. As Stokes put it, “Carl’s race represented a cause symbolizing the hopes of the Negro race. Mine isn’t.”<sup>11</sup> The 20 candidates who entered the May 1968 primary, many of them African Americans, bore out that analysis. However, Stokes’s organization proved far superior to his competition’s. He successfully portrayed himself as a unity candidate who could best serve the diverse factions within Cleveland’s black community. He won the primary with 41 percent of the vote—double the total of his closest competitor, black city councilman Leo A. Jackson. None of Stokes’s primary opponents ever challenged him again. “We took all the starch out of them, when we beat them so badly in the first primary,” he observed.<sup>12</sup> Stokes faced minimal opposition in his 14 subsequent primaries. Once, white leaders in the local Democratic machine recruited one of the incumbent’s former staffers to run against him in 1976. Stokes won by a landslide.<sup>13</sup>

In the 1968 general election, Stokes faced Republican Charles Lucas, an African American and a one-time ally in the fight to create a majority-black district. During several debates in the campaign between Lucas and Stokes, “law and order” emerged as a central theme. Stokes unrelentingly tied Lucas to Republican presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon (as well as to conservative segregationists like Independent George Wallace of Alabama and Republican Strom Thurmond of South Carolina), arguing they would not promote legislation that advanced black interests.<sup>14</sup> Stokes prevailed with 75 percent of the vote.<sup>15</sup> He won his subsequent 14 general elections by lopsided margins in the

heavily Democratic district—taking as much as 88 percent of the vote.<sup>16</sup> Gradually, reapportionment changed the makeup of the state, eliminating five of Ohio’s 24 House seats. Stokes’s district expanded to include traditionally white communities like cultural hubs Shaker Heights and Cleveland Heights. Reapportionment in the early 1990s brought in working-class white neighborhoods including Euclid in east Cleveland. While the proportion of blacks in the district fell to 59 percent, Stokes was largely unaffected.<sup>17</sup>

As a freshman Representative, Stokes received assignments on the Education and Labor Committee and the Internal Security Committee (formerly the House Un-American Activities Committee). He enthusiastically accepted the former assignment, believing Education and Labor would be a prime platform from which he could push the agenda for his urban district: job training, economic opportunity, and educational interests. But Stokes was less pleased with the Internal Security panel, which had lapsed into an increasingly irrelevant entity since its heyday investigating communists in the 1940s and 1950s. (House leaders disbanded it entirely in the mid-1970s.)

During his second term in the House, Stokes earned a seat on the powerful Appropriations Committee, with oversight of all federal spending bills. This exclusive assignment required him to relinquish his other committee assignments. During more than two decades on the committee, Stokes steered hundreds of millions of federal dollars into projects in his home state. He eventually became an Appropriations subcommittee chair, or “cardinal,” for Veterans, HUD, and Independent Agencies—controlling more than \$90 billion annually in federal money.<sup>18</sup> Stokes was the second African-American “cardinal” ever (the first, Julian Dixon of California, chaired the DC Subcommittee). Years later, Stokes said of the Appropriations Committee, “It’s the only committee to be on. All the rest is window dressing.”<sup>19</sup> In addition to chairing an Appropriations subcommittee, Stokes is one of fewer than two dozen African Americans ever to chair a House committee and one of just a handful

to wield the gavel on multiple panels: the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (100th Congress), the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct (97th–98th Congresses, 102nd Congress), and the Select Committee on Assassinations (95th Congress).

The growing ranks of black Members sought to create a power base, realizing—in the words of Representative William (Bill) Clay, Sr. of Missouri they “had to parlay massive voting potential into concrete economic results.”<sup>20</sup> As freshman House Members, Stokes and Clay quickly developed an enduring friendship and became strong supporters of the formation of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), to promote economic, educational, and social issues that were important to African Americans. This strategy dovetailed with Stokes’s perception of his role as an advocate for the “black community” in his district.<sup>21</sup> Stokes served as chairman of the CBC for two consecutive terms beginning in 1972, after Chairman Charles Diggs, Jr., of Michigan resigned from the post.<sup>22</sup> A centrist, Stokes was widely credited with shepherding the group away from the polarizing politics of various black factions toward a more stable and organized policy agenda.<sup>23</sup>

Using his position as CBC chairman and his increasing influence on the Appropriations Committee, Representative Stokes pushed a legislative agenda that mirrored the needs of his majority-black district. He earned a reputation as a congenial but determined activist for minority issues, consistently scoring as one of the most liberal Members of the House in the Americans for Democratic Action and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations vote tallies. He advocated more funding for education (particularly for minority colleges), affirmative action programs to employ more blacks, housing and urban development projects, and initiatives to improve access to health care for working-class Americans. In the 1980s, Stokes vocalized black concerns that the Ronald W. Reagan administration was intent on rolling back minority gains made in the 1960s and 1970s. He described conservative efforts to scale back school desegregation efforts and affirmative

action programs—as well as massive spending on military programs—as a “full scale attack” on the priorities of the black community.<sup>24</sup> He also was an early advocate of federal government intervention in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

From his seat on the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Stokes was a particularly forceful critic of the Reagan administration’s foreign policy. He gained national prominence as a member of the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran when he grilled Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North in 1987 about his role in funding anticommunist Nicaraguan Contras through weapons sales to Tehran. At one juncture he reminded North, “I wore [the uniform] as proudly as you do, even when our government required black and white soldiers in the same Army to live, sleep, eat and travel separate and apart, while fighting and dying for our country.”<sup>25</sup>

House leaders repeatedly sought to capitalize on Stokes’s image as a stable, trustworthy, and competent adjudicator—turning to him to lead high-profile committees and handle controversial national issues, as well as the occasional ethics scandals in the House. When Representative Henry Gonzalez of Texas abruptly resigned as chairman of the Select Committee on Assassinations after a dispute with staff and Members, Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O’Neill of Massachusetts tapped Stokes to lead the panel, which was investigating the circumstances surrounding the deaths of President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1978, Stokes’s committee filed 27 volumes of hearings and a final report that recommended administrative and legislative reforms. While the panel found that the King and the Kennedy murders may have involved multiple assassins (James Earl Ray and Lee Harvey Oswald have traditionally been described as lone killers), it concluded there was no evidence to support assertions of a broad conspiracy involving domestic groups or foreign governments—an assessment that has been upheld for the past three decades.<sup>26</sup> The committee did suggest that Oswald may

have had an accomplice on Dealey Plaza, where Kennedy was killed in November 1963.<sup>27</sup>

Stokes’s chairmanship of the Select Committee on Assassinations led to his appointment by Speaker O’Neill in 1981 as chairman of the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct (often called the Ethics Committee). Stokes steered the panel through a turbulent period that included investigations of Members implicated in the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s ABSCAM sting and a sex scandal that involved two House Members and current and former House Pages. In the latter case, Stokes’s panel recommended reforms that overhauled the Page program. Stokes left the post in 1985 but returned to lead the panel in early 1991. In 1992, after Stokes was linked to the House “Bank” scandal (he wrote 551 overdrafts against an informal account maintained by the House Sergeant at Arms), his status as an ethics overseer was somewhat diminished—but constituents still re-elected him by a wide margin.<sup>28</sup>

During the 1990s, Stokes’s seniority made him an influential voice on the Appropriations Committee. In 1993, at the start of the 103rd Congress, he assumed the chairman’s gavel of the Subcommittee on VA, HUD, and Independent Agencies, which controlled one of the largest chunks of discretionary spending in the federal budget. Stokes prodded federal agencies to hire and serve more minorities.<sup>29</sup> Republicans praised him for his nonpartisan leadership of the subcommittee, but when the GOP won control of the House in the 1994 elections, and Stokes became the Ranking Member of the panel, he often found himself fighting Republican efforts to trim federal spending that involved cutting welfare programs, including public housing. In one committee meeting, Stokes noted that he and his brother, Carl, had grown up in public housing, and that without such assistance “[we] would be either in jail or dead, we’d be some kind of statistic.” Appropriations Committee Chairman Robert L. Livingston of Louisiana responded, “We can play this compassion game all day but it won’t cut it.”<sup>30</sup>

In January 1998, Stokes announced his retirement

from the House, noting that he wanted to leave “without ever losing an election.”<sup>31</sup> He conceded that politics had lost some of its appeal since his brother Carl’s death from cancer two years earlier. “We used to talk every day. We could run things by one another,” he recalled. “We could think and strategize on political issues. I guess without him here, it really has taken away a lot of what I enjoy about politics. It’s not the same.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, a new generation of rising black politicians in Cleveland was displacing those of Stokes’s generation.<sup>33</sup> Among his proudest accomplishments as a Representative, Stokes cited his ability to bring Appropriations Committee money to his district to address needs in housing and urban development and the opportunities that allowed him to set “historic precedents” as an African American in the House.<sup>34</sup> “When I started this journey, I realized that I was the first black American ever to hold this position in this state,” Stokes told a newspaper reporter. “I had to write the book . . . I was going to set a standard of excellence that would give any successor something to shoot for.”<sup>35</sup> As his replacement, Stokes supported Stephanie Tubbs Jones, an African-American judge and a former prosecutor who prevailed in the Democratic primary and easily won election to the House in 1998. After his congressional career, Louis Stokes resumed his work as a lawyer and resides in Silver Spring, Maryland.

## FOR FURTHER READING

Fenno, Richard F. *Going Home: Black Representatives and Their Constituents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

“Stokes, Louis,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=S000948>.

## MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

**Howard University** (Washington, DC), Manuscript Division, Moorland–Spingarn Research Center. *Oral History*: In the Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, 1973, 17 pages. An interview with Louis Stokes (March 14, 1973) in which he discusses his reasons for entering politics. Other subjects include the Congressional Black Caucus, including its origin and goals and divisions within the group, Stokes’s relationship with President Richard M. Nixon’s administration, the Black National Political Convention in Indiana (1972), and black support of Democratic and Republican presidential candidates.

**Western Reserve Historical Society** (Cleveland, OH). *Papers*: The Carl Stokes Papers, 1957–1972, 104.51 linear feet. The papers include material relating to Carl Stokes’s brother, Louis.

## NOTES

- 1 Richard F. Fenno, *Going Home: Black Representatives and Their Constituents* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003): 22.
- 2 “Louise Stokes, Mother of Congressman and Mayor,” 13 February 1978, *New York Times*: D8.
- 3 David Hess, “She Urged Sons ‘To Be Somebody,’” 16 December 1968, *Christian Science Monitor*: 6.
- 4 Tom Brazaitis, “Stokes Era Comes to End,” 18 January 1998, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*: 1A.
- 5 *Congressional Directory, 91st Congress* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1969): 141.
- 6 Fenno, *Going Home*: 14.

- 7 Ibid., 15.
- 8 Kermit L. Hall, *The Oxford Companion to the Supreme Court of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 865–866.
- 9 Fenno, *Going Home*: 16.
- 10 Ibid., 37.
- 11 Roldo Bartimole, “Negroes’ Election in Nonwhite Areas Isn’t Automatic, Cleveland Race Shows,” 6 May 1968, *Wall Street Journal*: 12.
- 12 Fenno, *Going Home*: 28.
- 13 Ibid., 42–43, 49.
- 14 William L. Clay, *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991* (New York: Amistad Press, 1992): 113–114.
- 15 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at [http://clerk.house.gov/member\\_info/electionInfo/index.html](http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html).
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993): 1204.
- 18 An allusion to the “College of Cardinals,” who elect and advise the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, the cardinal title is meant to convey the power and authority vested in the handful of Appropriations Committee Members who shape federal expenditures. At the time, Stokes was one of 13 Appropriations subcommittee chairs.
- 19 Fenno, *Going Home*: 188.
- 20 Clay, *Just Permanent Interests*: 111, 173–174. Clay also observed that he, Chisholm, and Stokes “considered ourselves, along with other black representatives, to have a mandate to speak forcefully and loudly in behalf of equitable treatment of minorities by government.”
- 21 Fenno, *Going Home*: 62.
- 22 Paul Delaney, “Rep. Stokes Heads the Black Caucus,” 9 February 1972, *New York Times*: 23.
- 23 Marguerite Ross Barnett, “The Congressional Black Caucus,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 32 (Volume 1975, Number 1): 39–40.
- 24 Jeffrey M. Elliot, *Black Voices in American Politics* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1986): 40–41.
- 25 *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1989): 1206.
- 26 See, for example, Gerald Posner’s *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003); Vincent Bugliosi’s *Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007); and Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–68* (New York: Simon and Chuster, 2006).
- 27 George Lardner, Jr., “JFK-King Panel Finds Conspiracy Likely in Slayings,” 31 December 1978, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 28 See, for example, *Politics in America, 1994*: 1203; Fenno, *Going Home*: 181.
- 29 *Politics in America, 1996* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1995): 1043; see also *Politics in America, 1994*: 1203–1205.
- 30 *Politics in America, 1998* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1997): 1140–1142; quote on 1140.
- 31 “Louis Stokes, Ohio Democrat, Plans to Retire from Congress,” 18 January 1998, *New York Times*: 23; Tom Brazaitis and Sabrina Eaton, “Rep. Stokes to Retire; Congressman Won’t Seek Re-Election; Clevelander Rose From Poverty to Heights of Power,” 17 January 1998, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*: 1A.
- 32 Brazaitis, “Stokes Era Comes to End.”
- 33 *Politics in America, 1994*: 1204.
- 34 Fenno, *Going Home*: 188–189.
- 35 Brazaitis, “Stokes Era Comes to End.”



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