

3-1-1972

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Under Two Flags

Talk at Trinity College, Hartford, Conn.

by

Ernest R. Bonner

March 1972

UNDER TWO FLAGS . . .

A little less than one year ago today, after 3½ years in office as Mayor of Cleveland, Carl B. Stokes announced he would not seek re-election.

Three pretenders to the throne eventually emerged --

- a millionaire businessman and developer running on the Democratic ticket who stressed efficiency in government and Cleveland's need for unity under strong executive leadership;
- a black candidate and president of the school board running as an independent who stressed efficiency in government and Cleveland's need for unity under strong executive leadership; and
- the Republican County Auditor making his third run for the Mayor's office who stressed that Carl Stokes was the villain and that a vote for the other two candidates was a vote for Carl B. Stokes.

On November 2, 1971, 38% of the electorate voted against Carl B. Stokes and, in a 3-way race, this gave Ralph J. Perk a stunning and sizeable plurality. Six days later Mayor Perk was sworn into office and the City of Cleveland waited expectantly -- some waited in fear -- for the drastic changes promised by the apparently drastic change in leadership.

Much of the difference in the two as perceived by Cleveland voters was an obvious difference in personalities. Stokes has an unfailing charisma, a cosmopolitan air; is flamboyant in his dress and manner, engaging and engrossing in his public appearances. He

has a national (even international) following, uses the electronic media well both locally and nationally.

Perk, on the other hand, is viewed as steady, honest and sincere -- a family man who attends church regularly. He wears \$40 suits proudly and pays for his own travel as Mayor. He is less than noteworthy before TV but very much at home in church basements, where he ate and talked for six years with those who voted for him in November. He fixes his own oatmeal for breakfast every day, lives in the same neighborhood that he was born. His wife bowls regularly, he sings with a local barbershop quartet.

Though differences between the two seem overwhelming -- and are usually emphasized by the news media -- there are some important similarities. Both were born and raised in Cleveland -- Stokes in an early public housing project on the near east side, Perk in an ethnic working class neighborhood in south Cleveland. Both have felt the pressing indignity and discipline of poverty. Both eventually finished higher education with financial difficulty. Both sprang into political life with poor working class constituencies and both eventually were elected to offices by a much wider constituency. Both espouse a moral commitment to essentially the same constituency -- in Stokes' terms the "poor people," in Perk's terms the "little people."

But, in the end, Stokes is black, Perk is not. When Stokes argues for attention to the needs of "poor people," voters hear him argue for black people. When Perk argues for attention to the needs of "little people," voters hear him argue for white people. This difference is fundamental and pervasive.

So, the differences between Stokes and Perk as individuals and as advocates were partly real, partly perceived; partly important, partly not. For the voters of Cleveland on November 2, 1971, the differences must have been real and important. We can safely assume that the significant minority of Clevelanders who voted for Perk wanted a drastic change in City Hall and that they felt Perk as Mayor would make those changes. This analysis of the possibility and extent of changes will be a progress report to them as well as you.

Because Perk's campaign was blatantly against Stokes (who wasn't even running) and only superficially for anything, it is difficult to speculate and impossible to know exactly what Perk's constituency wanted or expected. Aside from Perk's constant reminder that a vote for Pinkney or Carney (the other two candidates in the race) was a vote for Stokes, his campaign promises of importance were 4:

1. To join with other municipalities in the suburbs to cooperatively guide the destiny of the region,

2. to balance the City's budget with no increase in taxes,
3. to stop the construction of public housing in areas where residents did not want it (i.e., in white and black middle class neighborhoods) and
4. to get the "drones" and "hacks" (read blacks) out of City Hall.

These promises, in all cases, represent a change from Stokes' policies. Will Mayor Perk succeed in implementing these changes? Let me discuss them in turn.

City vs. Suburb -- Mayor Stokes wanted more influence in decisions made by regional entities which affected the City. He asked for this influence in decisions made by the 7-county regional agency which oversees federal spending in the area. When his proposal was rejected, he withdrew from the regional agency, refused to pay the City's dues, and initiated a lawsuit calling for one man-one vote representation on the agency's governing board.

Mayor Perk promised in his campaign to rejoin the regional agency, pay the City's dues and terminate the lawsuit.

After Mayor Perk's inauguration he did precisely that but subsequent events suggest that he will come slowly to see that the interests of the people of Cleveland -- particularly the interests of the poor -- are rarely served by the rural- and suburban-dominated board of the regional agency.

Admittedly, this view has been pressed upon him by the City Planning Director, and the Mayor's regional policy will wax and wane with his trust in the Director. But Mayor Perk has seen by now how two highways -- one approved by the regional agency and one soon to be approved, would decimate ethnic areas of political interest to him. He has also seen how a \$20 million law enforcement grant which he was crucial in getting (and which he planned to use for his police department) will accrue largely to the courts, correctional institutions and the suburbs as it works its way through the regional sieve. He will come to see more threats to City interests from projects to be proposed by the regional agency in mass transportation, housing and water and sewer. I predict that before his first term has expired, he will be fighting the suburbs with much the same vigor and maybe the same methods that Mayor Stokes used.

A Balanced City Budget -- Mayor Stokes sought to resolve the fiscal crisis of the City by asking voters for an increase in taxes.

Mayor Perk was vocal and adamant in his promise to the voters that he would balance the City's books without raising taxes -- by cutting costs.

Mayor Stokes argued throughout his second term in office that the City needed new revenues to maintain minimum service levels. In November of 1970, he asked for tax reform -- a reduction in property

taxes and an increase in income taxes -- to raise new revenues. He got the reduction in property taxes but not the increase in the income tax, and was forced into a first round of lay-offs a year before Perk came into office. Because Mayor Stokes would permit no cuts in public safety forces (police and fire), City services in health, recreation and waste collection were seriously curtailed.

Mayor Perk argued in his campaign that service levels could be maintained (or improved) with even more reductions in cost; he promised no tax increase if elected. When he assumed office he found that the cuts by Stokes had already undermined services and that, with no new revenues to count on, the cost reductions needed would be drastic indeed. Most important, the public safety forces would have to assume some of the burden, for this department represents 70% of the general budget.

Further, the City ended 1971 with a deficit, varying between 2.5 million and 27 million depending upon your political persuasion, which would have to be paid off the top in 1972.

In short, Perk's promise not to increase taxes led him to proposals for severe cost reductions and these reductions could only be made with massive lay-offs. He began these lay-offs in December of 1971. To date, approximately 500 City employees have been severed from the payrolls.

Though the Mayor knew he must reduce the costs of police and fire, he did not want to lay off these, to him, crucial city employees. He privately proposed a compromise -- that all police and firemen remain on the job full-time, accept 90% of their legal wages now and 10% at some future date when the City got the money. The police and fire unions refused.

The Mayor, stung by the police and fire refusal, then proposed that all City employees -- police and fire included -- work only nine out of every ten days and receive only 90% of their current pay. The alternative, he threatened, was substantial lay-off of city workers, again, including police and fire.

The Fraternal Order of Police then sought, and obtained from the lower courts, an order prohibiting the Mayor from implementing this proposal insofar as the police and firemen are concerned. Mayor Perk appealed this order and got a temporary order from a higher court saying that his plan could be put into effect on an interim basis. The court will make a final decision on March 25th.

In the meantime, other City unions have indicated that they would reluctantly accept a proposal similar to that originally offered to the public safety forces -- they will work full time at 90% pay if the remaining 10% is eventually paid. Some individual police and firemen have indicated they would also prefer such a plan.

But the union leadership and higher echelons of the police and fire remain adamantly opposed to lay-offs, reductions in pay and work, or deferred payments. They cite the usual crime statistics and make the standard comparisons to show that the City cannot reduce its efforts in any way in this society's struggle against crime. At the same time these leaders will not commit themselves in support of any measure to increase revenues through tax increases. They have presented the Mayor with a difficult dilemma. The irony of it is at once beautiful and ugly.

In short, Mayor Perk must eventually come to the realization that he cannot reduce costs as much as he needs to (costs will be deferred, not reduced), that new revenues will be required, and that his resolution of the fiscal crisis will not vary significantly from the resolution Mayor Stokes was heading for -- costs would be cut somewhat and new revenues will have to be found in tax increases.

As a slight digression, it is noteworthy that neither Mayor held any abiding interest in efficiency of City government operations. Mayor Stokes, in his appeals for new revenues was not interested in management studies showing ways in which the City could do more with what it had. In the same way, Mayor Perk's cost-cutting is absolutely without discrimination -- a straight 10% cut across the board with no attention nor preference given to priorities or affect on services.

Low Income Public Housing -- Mayor Stokes wanted low-income public housing in every neighborhood in the City and in the suburbs as well.

Mayor Perk says he will fight the location of public housing in any area where the residents do not want it. He appears to include the suburbs in this as he has halted City work on a new town because suburban neighbors were opposed to low-income residents in the proposal.

Mayor Perk revoked the building permits for two previously-approved public housing projects in white areas of the City immediately upon assuming office. In both cases, fulfillment of his campaign pledge subjected him to court action. In one case, court action has already been requested by the local public housing authority and the court's decision will most certainly be against him.

Though Mayor Perk, by this action, did accomplish a drastic change in public housing and did please his constituency immensely, he has at the same time posed himself another dilemma. On the one hand, he threatens to fight any public housing located in white areas. On the other hand, he is the chief executive officer of a City which has a contractual agreement with the local public housing authority to build or buy and operate public housing units in all parts of the City.

The City did not agree to permit public housing in all areas of the City because City Councilmen were great paragons of virtue and equity. The Council agreed to this under threat from the federal government that if this were not accomplished, substantial federal funds in urban renewal, open space and water and sewer would be withheld from badly-needed City projects.

Mayor Perk cannot continue his obstinance without suffering this threat again. At such time he will stand uncomfortably between a raging white constituency which demands a halt to public housing and a federal bureaucracy which threatens no crucially-needed funds.

In the meantime, a local taxpayers association has succeeded in placing on the May ballot a referendum to terminate the contractual agreement whereby the City allows the local housing authority to operate in Cleveland. If this recall of the agreement is sustained by the electorate (and I have every reason to believe it will), the local housing authority's legal capacity to construct any public housing anywhere in the City will be questionable. Clearly, the local housing authority will not fold up its tent and go quietly away. They will sue the City for breach of contract.

And to further enliven the issue, the courts already have before them a suit brought by a local non-profit housing agency (PATH) charging that low-income black families suffer loss of their constitutional rights when public housing is excluded from some

areas of the City and all the suburbs of the County. This suit is designed to be argued before the U. S. Supreme Court and may eventually reach that point.

So it appears that Mayor Perk has accomplished change in the location of public housing but, in fact, the future of public housing in Cleveland will be decided by the courts. This will undoubtedly take many months, maybe years. In the meantime, it is quite possible that new public housing in the City of Cleveland will grind completely to a halt.

Perk will have made good on his campaign promise to block public housing in middle-class neighborhoods, but the price could easily be no public housing at all and, maybe, no federal funds in urban renewal, open space, and water and sewer projects.

Changing of the guard at City Hall -- Mayor Stokes wanted to place black people in positions of responsibility and control throughout the City Hall bureaucracy and on all independent boards and commissions attendant to the City. Many argue that he was more successful in this effort than any other.

Mayor Perk wants to place members of his white ethnic constituency in the same positions.

Because Mayor Stokes was so successful, Mayor Perk must now remove Stokes appointees to make room for Perk appointees. The Mayor moved swiftly upon his inauguration to remove administrative and

supervisory personnel -- mostly black -- from the payroll. The Civil Service Commission (appointed by Stokes) moved just as quickly to reinstate employees terminated illegally but most of the individuals fired then remain without a City job.

Most of the lay-offs of laborers, drivers, and other workers brought on by the so-called fiscal crisis were black and had been hired by the Stokes administration -- a beautiful example of what they mean by "last-hired, first-fired."

In addition, a number of top Stokes personnel have voluntarily left what is now to them a hostile environment at City Hall. Replacements for those individuals will be named by the new personnel director if at all.

The Mayor has yet to man all posts in his cabinet but his appointments to date are overwhelmingly white ethnic, and local.

Clearly, the guard is changing drastically at City Hall and the racial composition is only one dimension of this change.

An important part of this changing of the guard is a radical change in attitude at City Hall and an ominous change in the political climate of the City under its new leadership.

I cannot speak for all of those dedicated and expert professionals who voluntarily left City employment either just before or just after Perk's election (your own Prof. Gold was one of them) but I can try to convey to you my own feelings. Mayor Stokes, in my opinion, sincerely believes that our society needs basic revision

in its distribution of income and power and that this society needs basic revision in its ends to accomplish this. His attention to these ends included his willingness to fight for programs he believed contributed to those ends, sometimes at great political risk.

Mayor Perk has indicated no understanding of these ends nor, to my observation, any consistent philosophical position at all.

To work for Mayor Stokes was to apply your professional talents to the design of new social institutions and the coalition of new political constituencies dedicated to noble and specific ends. To work for Mayor Perk is to find these same talents irrelevant.

But the clear change in the political climate of Cleveland is perhaps the most noteworthy change of all. Mayor Stokes, from his point of leverage in City Hall, forged a black power bloc in a major American city for the first time in this country's history. The white reaction to this show of power formed the base upon which Mayor Perk is now forging a white ethnic power bloc, equal in status and numbers to the black power bloc.

This change in the balance of power is at once dramatic and dangerous. I invite you to follow Cleveland closely over the next decade, for a glance into the future of scores of major American cities. Will the two power blocs come to see their mutual interests and mutual enemies? Or will they spend themselves in bitter struggle before their bemused audience in the suburbs? I hope for the former but realistically expect the latter.

Thank you.