

Interview with **Seth Taft**

Date: October 27, 1988

Interviewer: Louis Massiah

Camera Rolls: 3038-3039

Sound Rolls: 318

Team: C

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

**Preferred Citation**

Interview with Seth Taft, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 27, 1988 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #3038]

[sound roll # 318]

00:00:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Scene twelve, take one.

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Interviewer:

OK. Take us back to October of 1967. How did, how did your campaign change after Carl Stokes won the primary?

00:00:25:00

Seth Taft:

Well, it was a bit interesting, and I think I'd better give you a little history [unintelligible]. This campaign started because the incumbent Mayor of Cleveland, Ralph Locher, was not doing a terribly good job. There had been a great deal of unrest in the city in 1966. We'd had some riots of various kinds, and, so by 1967, the incumbent mayor was in real trouble. I had thought about running for mayor before, but gradually in that springtime I finally concluded that this was the time to do it. And I, of course, in some respects was a carpetbagger. I had lived in the suburbs. On the other hand, I had spent most of my waking hours for the previous twenty years in the city of Cleveland, so it was really my home. Then, as we came up towards the filing deadline, in Cleveland at that time there's a Republican primary, a Democratic primary, and you could file as an independent. I, and I thought of filing as an independent, because Cleveland is a three- four- or five-to-one Democratic, so that having the word Republican under your name wasn't necessarily an asset. So I thought of filing as independent and thought I would have a better chance of being successful. On the other hand, the Republican party said to me, If you run as an independent, we're gonna file a Republican candidate, and that would've di—so diffused the vote, so that there was no chance of being elected, so I said all right, I'll run in the Republican primary. Then, as we got up to the filing deadline, around the first of July, Carl Stokes was the very prominent candidate for, on the Democratic side. He'd been a state legislator who was very popular. He was very articulate. A fine person, he and I had worked on legislation together in various fields like fair housing and things of that sort. So that we were, we were good friends. And as we got up the filing deadline, it suddenly appeared that maybe he was gonna run as an independent. And if he ran as an independent, there would then be at least three people in the general election. There'd be Stokes, there'd be somebody who'd won the Democratic primary, and it would be me—we—me who'd won the Republican primary. I concluded under those circumstances I didn't have a cha—have a prayer of, of getting elected mayor. So I announced publicly that I would not run for mayor unless Carl Stokes filed in the Democratic primary. Now, I can't say whether that influenced his decision, but at any rate, after I made that statement, he in fact did decide to, to file in the Democratic primary, and then I filed as a Republican. Frankly, I thought at that time the incumbent mayor would win. After all, you would, that would be the normal thing to expect, that an incumbent mayor would win the primary of his own party. So, frankly, I, I thought that Ralph Locher, the incumbent mayor, would, would win the Democratic primary. And I sort of campaigned on that basis. Now I was, during that period in the summer, since I was the only person who'd filed in the Republican primary, I had no competition. Now the primary in Cleveland at that time was five weeks before the general election, so it was about the first of October. So that from the filing deadline in late June, early July until October—that's July, August, September, three months. The Democrats were having a, a rip-roaring primary candi—campaign, and I was, didn't have one. So I had to run my efforts in such a way as to keep me in front of the voters, so they would know who I was. We even, a, a guy who was running the media part of my campaign said, You gotta have something attractive, so, so we got an elephant. So, we got, we got an elephant.

00:04:01:00

Interviewer:

OK, so, so after the primary.

Seth Taft:

[laughs] You wanna get back to the primary.

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

00:04:03:00

Seth Taft:

I don't think I could tell you about the primary until I tell you about the, what happened before it. So we had an elephant, and we went around and said, "Remember Seth Taft in November." Then the primary came along, and Carl Stokes won the Democratic primary. Frankly I was, I was very surprised. And he did, and that obviously changed things. Suddenly there I was running against Carl Stokes, a person whom I had, he and I had worked together on lots of, lots of projects, and that was not a comfortable situation to be in. All the people in the, Cleveland, you must understand. Perhaps other part of the country, people wouldn't understand. Cleveland is a community that grew up primarily around the turn of the century when the major immigration to the United States was from Eastern Europe. So Cleveland is a city full of nationality groups primarily from Eastern Europe. When I arrived in Cleveland, if you can believe it, there were three or four daily newspapers in Eastern European languages. There was one in Polish, there was one in German. There was one in Hungarian. There were probably fifteen or twenty weekly newspapers written in foreign languages, and what they tended to group in areas, so that you'd be a, there's a Hungarian neighborhood, and there was a Polish neighborhood, and there was an Italian neighborhood. Now these people had come over, had scratched their way up the ladder, and finally made it, and they were, they were now happy with their, their lot. They'd worked hard themselves to make their way. They're all Democrats. I guess it used to be said that's because Franklin Roosevelt saved their homes from the foreclosure in the Depression. But these people were Democrats, but they were not comfortable with the newest wave of "immigrants" which were from the South, Black. And consequently, their attitude was, Hey, we made it by crawling up the ladder. Why can't these new people make it by crawling up the ladder? So there was, there was a lot of feeling within the community, within this, this nationality-oriented community, that somehow the newest group weren't making it on their own. And that somehow or other, therefore they were not enthusiastic about Carl Stokes. That's what it amounts to. *So right after the primary, we just had thousands of people marching into our headquarters, saying, We wanna campaign for you. We think you're the great guy. They'd never heard of me before, but so. We had a, it made a very uncomfortable situation, I can assure you, when a whole batch of people rush into your headquarters and want to work in your campaign, when you don't like their motive.* On the other hand, if you were running for office, and somebody said, I'll vote for you, and you don't like the reason he's gonna vote for you, do you turn him down? Do you say, Don't vote for me, because I don't like why you're gonna vote for me? So uncomfortable as it was, we, I couldn't see any alternative but to accept those supporters. *We fired a whole*

*batch of them that went out and campaigned saying, Hey, you wouldn't want a Black mayor of this city, would you? And, we got rid of everybody we could of that sort. Frankly, both of us ran a, I think, a very much an affirmative non-racially oriented campaign, but the racial issue was like one postage stamp thickness below the surface.* It was sort of there all the time. You couldn't, it was very hard to get away from, partly because there wasn't much difference between the two of us except color.

00:07:33:00

Interviewer:

OK, what kind of campaign had you hoped to run? I mean who, who did you hope would support you?

00:07:38:00

Seth Taft:

Well, I, I hoped that the supporters of Carl Stokes would support me. I was, I'd had, I'd been on the Urban League board. I'd been involved in lots of things, and where the Black community was. I'd been the head of fund-raising campaigns for settlement houses in the Black community. I had a very good reputation. And I, I felt that, since the, the Democratic majority, and Locher himself was from Romania, he was a part of that, that nationality group I was describing to you. I felt that the Black community would come behind me, so I felt that the combination of Republican support, plus just sort of general civic background that I'd been involved in, plus the Black community, was enough to get a majority. And so frankly, I made a major effort to get along with Carl all during the primary, and I'll tell you a little later about a very embarrassing letter I wrote to him, that so that, that was, that was the campaign I expected to run. And I, I thought that was a plausible one that had a good chance of success, because Locher, who would then in that set of assumptions be the opposition candidate, was a guy who'd had all the trouble in City Hall.

00:08:49:00

Interviewer:

OK, did you, did you expect that the business community would come out solidly behind you after, after Stokes won?

00:08:54:00

Seth Taft:

No. Not a bit. Now I met, there was a, because already in the primary, I could see what a lot of my business acquaintances were doing. They believed that after the troubles of the previous year, that we might very well be better off to have a Black mayor. That, that if we

had a Black mayor, he would be able to understand, and to deal with the concerns of the Black community in a better way than a White mayor. And that, so a lot of, a lot of my people that I knew in business were supporting Stokes, and I, I knew it. I mean I, I had a lot of supporting me, but there was certainly no unanimity whatsoever in the business community over who should be elected mayor.

00:09:35:00

Interviewer:

OK. After the first debate, that was the one at Alexander Hamilton on the East Side. How, how did you feel after it was over? What was your assessment?

00:09:44:00

Seth Taft:

Oh, my assessment was not very comfortable. It was not, not a, it was difficult. Carl did a much better job of introducing his family, and yeah. Of course, it was in an area where the audience was 90 percent pro-Stokes, so that it was, wasn't very easy for me to make any kind of a presentation. Anything I'd say would sort of get hooted down. So it was a very uncomfortable situation. He's, he's very good on his feet. He's articulate. He did a, a nice job of presenting the issues, and no. I did, I did not feel that I was any better off afterward. Though I should say that early in the campaign, I had to be sure we had debates, because he was the guy who was well-known. Polls had shown in early spring that he would beat me three to one in a general election. By June it was down to two to one. By October, it was about three to two in his favor. And I knew that I had no chance of success unless I got him on a debating platform. Not that I was such a great debater, but I had to get that, that amount of attention. Now, I knew Carl well enough that I was pretty sure that I could challenge him in a way he wouldn't refuse. Because this young whipper-snapper isn't gonna talk and say I'm afraid ofbate—the debate. And so, our, our technique was to be sure that we got debates. And so I, a lot of places, I said, This guy—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Seth Taft:

—hasn't got the nerve to stand up and, and debate the issues in this city.

00:11:11:00

Interviewer:

All right, we're gonna change. Just stop it. Very, very, yeah, very good.

[cut]

[camera roll #3039]

00:11:16:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:11:19:00

Interviewer:

OK. We're gonna, we're gonna jump to, to the second debate.

Seth Taft:

Sure.

Interviewer:

That was the one at, at John Marshall High School on East Side. Louie Seltzer is the moderator. Carl Stokes comes up to the platform. What does he say? What, what happened that night?

00:11:33:00

Seth Taft:

Well, it started off fairly routine manner, where each one was sort of saying why we should, saying why he should be mayor. Then at some, at one point in the, in the, when he was on the floor, he turned to me and said, and pointed his finger at me and said, If this man is elected mayor, it will be because his skin is White. ***The whole place went kablooey. You couldn't, you couldn't hear a thing for five minutes, and Carl was then trying, trying to say, Hey! Hey! Hey! To get attention and so forth. But he'd, he lost the audience. Now, that audience was a West Side audience, and it was 90 percent White.*** So he, he really stuck his head in the buzz saw at, at that event. Now, there'd been explanations later as to why he did it, and it, you can ask him about that. But it, it had an electrifying effect on that particular

audience, and through him pretty, I don't think he expected to get quite such a horribly adverse reaction. It was the first time there'd been a mention of anything by either of us of, of that kind of directly racial character. So when I got up, I started off, I said, Well, well, well. So the race issue is with us. Let me tell you about it. So I pulled out a full-page ad from the Cleveland Plain Dealer. Which had in, in words, all you could read was, great big Black words that said, "Don't Vote For a Negro!" Exclamation point. Vote for a man. Vote for a good candidate. Vote for somebody with confidence. Vote for Carl Stokes. Then he, then, I pulled out another one, which said same, same thing, just those few words you could read. "Let's do Cleveland proud." And then it says, "Do Cleveland proud by overcoming your prejudices, and vote for the most competent person, vote for Carl Stokes. So he had been, he had been playing this issue just barely off to the most direct way of doing it. And this time he really, he, he got in, he got into the middle of it. And when that debate was over, that was clearly a potential turning point. If I had won, that would've been the turning point. The, after that, he did, he did better, but that particular debate, he was really, walked into a, a bad situation. Now, his later explanations, at least as I heard them, and you'll have to ask him directly, was that he felt this was important to consolidate his own support. Which was important, because as, as you probably figured out, in the final result, he got 95 percent of the Black vote in the city, which is about 40 percent of the total vote, and I got 80 percent of the White vote. And that was a dead tie mathematically, which is about the way it came out.

00:14:09:00

Interviewer:

OK, did any of your campaign people, did, did any of them ever strategize that maybe you should deal with the race issue? I mean, you obviously had those two, two newspapers—

00:14:17:00

Seth Taft:

Oh, I was, I was armed for, I had a feeling it, it might come up. I would have never brought it up, but he, he finally felt that that was something he had to do, or wanted to do. And, and I had a, I had a, I had an old folder of, of different issues, little things, and when he, when he made that statement, I yanked the folder out that said "race" or something like that, I do not remember what. And I had those ads that I'd been carrying around with me to use if the occasion required.

00:14:43:00

Interviewer:

OK, now, now the third debate at the Sheraton Cleveland, I think that's the one that—

00:14:49:00

Seth Taft:

That's called the City Club debate. We have a, a club here that puts on debates between candidates. It's sort of the last, final debate that generally traditionally among major, in any major campaign, it's usually the Saturday before election or maybe one Saturday before that. And this was obviously a, a, by this time, this was the hottest subject in town.

00:15:07:00

Interviewer:

And so what happened there, that night?

00:15:09:00

Seth Taft:

Well, it was, it, it went very routinely, because we'd made lots of appearances besides those two debates. It didn't really prove much one way or the other as far as I could tell, but right at the very end, really it actually is, after the time they were supposed to go off the air, he pulled out a letter that I had written him back in June. And he, meanwhile, I had, I had made, gotten charts up there about how, how much he'd been absent during the session of the legislature that preceding spring. And he pulled out this letter I had written him in June saying, Dear Carl, you've done a great job down in Columbus, keep it up! [laughs] So, so I'd sort of, sort of punched a hole in my comment about his sixty percent appear—I had elaborate charts as to how he'd been not attending regularly at the sessions of legislature. He was a member of the legislature at the time, and so that letter was sort of, my manager then said, Did you write that letter? [laughs] And I said yeah, I guess I did.

Interviewer:

So, so briefly—

Seth Taft:

That's the only thing I really remember about that debate. Except it was a great, big public hall, where it was going on.

00:16:10:00

Interviewer:

OK, now briefly, election night. It was a, you're, you're rising in the polls. What, what happened? I mean, it was, it was like four a.m. before it was decided. How did, how did you think it was going?



00:16:20:00

Seth Taft:

Well, it was interesting. About two o'clock, or maybe two-thirty, I, *we were ahead in what had come in so far. And so the guys were getting me practiced up on an acceptance speech, or, or whatever we might call it. And then somebody came in with a list of what precincts had not reported. And as soon as we saw that, it was all over, because the precincts that hadn't been reported at that moment were precincts in the Black community.* And we knew what the outcome in all of those would be, so that as soon as, as soon as we saw the precincts that were not in, we were reasonably sure that, that Stokes had won.

00:17:00:00

Interviewer:

OK, did, did Stokes's victory represent a, a new power alliance? What, what, what did you think it represented at the time? Did you see something new happening in Cleveland?

00:17:10:00

Seth Taft:

Well, it certainly represented the first real acceptance of the Black community as a political power within the city. There had been, Blacks had run for, for mayor in previous elections, but never got the consolidated support even within the Black community. And the Cleveland City Council was still significantly White in its orientation, even though in some of the wards the councilmen were White, because they'd been there forever and were well-respected in their wards. But when they retired, or died, or whatever, they were, they were supplanted by Black councilmen. So that there, there was a change going on there, that has progressively continued up until this very day. And so it, it did a—come, become the emergence of the Black community as a powerful figure in, in the equation in the city of Cleveland. It meant that the city of Cleveland was very consistently run in such a way that, was whether the mayor was White or Black thereafter, very strong civil rights programs, equal opportunity programs within the city administration. So that did represent a, a significant change. And I suppose you would say that, as the view of the Black community became stronger within the city administration, it meant a heavier commitment to effective social programs, to improvement of the lot of the people. On the other hand, the city had to live within its income, so that you couldn't sort of suddenly say, Well, we're gonna build a, a lot of housing, or, or something like that. The city still had to, under Ohio law, it had to operate within its income. And it, in that sense, the management of the city didn't change dramatically.

00:19:04:00

Interviewer:

OK. One of Stokes's favorite ways of talking about this, this contest between you two was the grandson of a slave versus the grandson of, of a president. I mean, in the context—

Seth Taft:

Those are two accidents of birth, so I just laughed at it.

Interviewer:

Though in the context of the time, and we're talking about the civil rights era—losing to a Black candidate, did that have any particular significance to you?

00:19:28:00

Seth Taft:

No. I mean, you know, he was a candidate. He's a guy who won the election. That was it. As far as I personally was concerned, obviously, obviously sorry I didn't win. But, because I, I thought the job would be a great challenge. I still do. I think the office of the Mayor of Cleveland is a significant job. He's the second-most influential person in the state of Ohio politically, after the governor. It's a tremendous opportunity for anyone to make sure government is well-done and to be a spokesman for whatever it is that a person believes in. And Carl was a good spokesman for things he believed in, and he, I think he contributed a great deal to the advancement of equal opportunity in the city of Cleveland.

00:20:08:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop the camera. Does anyone else have any—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:20:14:00

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