

By George P. Rasanen
Photo Dealer Service

WASHINGTON — The temptation to hammer away at James Earl Ray was there, but Rep. Louis Stokes chose not to yield.

Instead, Stokes, chairman of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, quietly and methodically pried away at the story of the one-time confessed murderer of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — not with any sledgehammer, but with a fine stiletto.

As a nationwide television audience watched, Ray, surrounded by armed federal marshals, gave his version of what happened. Then Stokes with his questions and evidence drove huge holes into Ray's sworn testimony.

Even the annoying outbursts of Ray's controversial lawyer, Mark Lane, failed to ruffle Stokes. He coolly pursued Ray from beginning to end — almost in the same way Ray had stalked Dr. King.

Stokes wove a circumstantial trail of evidence to show that Ray had tracked the civil rights leader across the country to Atlanta, Ga.,

on April 1, 1968, and then three days later fatally shot King in Memphis, Tenn.

Ray said if Stokes could show he was in Atlanta on April 1, he'd "take responsibility for the King case right here on TV."

Like a cool gambler holding an ace up his sleeve, Stokes produced a laundry ticket showing that Ray had dropped off a bundle of clothes at an Atlanta cleaners on April 1, a day on which Ray had all along insisted he was elsewhere.

"He (Ray) did say he'd take responsibility for the King case if I proved he was in Atlanta on April 1," Stokes said recently, smiling broadly.

For Stokes, his calculating yet even-handed treatment of Ray was a high point in the \$5.8 million committee probe into the assassinations of King and President John F. Kennedy.

The low point was when Stokes lost his temper at the tactics of a lawyer for John Ray, the older brother of James Earl. This came during a heated hearing intended to explore whether James Earl

conspired in any manner with his brothers to kill King.

Yet Stokes is credited by committee observers with quickly collecting "his cool" and surrendering the chair to a colleague to avoid further arguments.

"These hearings could have shaped into a circus but Stokes kept that from happening," said one committee watcher. "He handled the hearings with dignity, his questioning was succinct and his comments were often eloquent."

Stokes is also credited with keeping the committee leak-proof with the sole exception at the end when Rep. Harold Sawyer, R-Mich., during a Grand Rapids radio interview, let slip new and startling acoustical evidence indicating a fourth shot was fired at Kennedy in Dallas' Dealey Plaza and the probability of a second gunman, hence a conspiracy to murder the president.

Stokes was at first skeptical of the acoustical evidence, an analysis of a Dallas police tape recording of the assassination and a re-enactment of the gunshots in Dallas last Aug. 20.



Sketch by
Edward S. Freska

In the end, however, Stokes said he had to accept the evidence from two top acoustics scientists, even though the committee's finding that Kennedy was assassinated probably as a part of a conspiracy leaves unanswered some haunting questions.

"I really came to like Stokes over the course of hearings," said Carl Oglesby, one of the critics of the Warren Commission report on the JFK assassination. "I came to think of him as a man of weight and incredibly good judgment."

The only criticism from Oglesby was a view that perhaps Stokes allowed the committee chief counsel, G. Robert Blakey, too firm a hand in the early phase of the Kennedy investigation.

At the time, the committee appeared headed toward supporting the Warren Commission's central finding that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin of the president.

"The committee may have been about to whisper conspiracy, but the acoustical evidence turned that around dramatically," Oglesby said.

For Stokes, the chairmanship of the assassinations committee seems to have rekindled what some of his critics regard as a waning interest in staying in the House.

For years his brother, Carl B. Stokes, now an NBC newsmen in New York, and friends said his ambition had been to land an appointment to the U.S. District Court in Cleveland.

With Congress approving a bill to expand the federal judiciary, there had been repeated speculation that Stokes was angling for a federal judgeship appointment by President Carter.

But Stokes has now given signals to Sen. John H. Glenn and Howard M. Metzenbaum, both Ohio Demo-

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THE PLAIN DEALER, SUNDAY, JANUARY 7, 1979

Lou Stokes

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crats, that he isn't interested anymore in being considered. Stokes confirmed this in an interview.

At 53 Stokes has told his brother that he wants to stay in the House and is hopeful that his handling of the assassinations committee will enhance his reputation and stature there.

"He feels he has finally arrived in the House," said Carl Stokes.

Stokes' colleagues in the House also praise Stokes for rescuing a much-maligned committee that was almost killed by the House in early 1977. The committee was torn by dissension between a former committee chairman and Richard A. Sprague, the chief counsel Stokes deposed to win a favorable House vote to continue the inquiries.

Sprague's sin had been to feud openly with the committee's former chairman, an act that violated principles held dear by elected politicians.

"Keeping Sprague would have flown against the tradition of the House," Stokes said. "I knew I had to get rid of him."

Stokes recruited G. Robert Blakey, a Cornell University law professor and a Justice Department lawyer when the late Robert F. Kennedy was the attorney general, to replace Sprague.

The Stokes-Blakey combine quickly reorganized the committee's staff, won vital funding from the House and made unprecedented use of innovative and scientific tools for investigating both assassinations, especially the murder of Kennedy.

The methods are likely to promote reforms in the traditional and unsophisticated question-and-answer format that past congressional investigations have employed.

Stokes' decision to let Blakey spend money on new investigative devices such as the acoustics testing has won praise from House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, D-Mass., and former Special Watergate Prosecutor Leon Jaworski.

By the time the committee finished its work and concluded there were probably conspiracies — most likely never provable — in both assassinations, it had answered a lot more questions than many critics had thought possible. And it opened up the Warren Commission findings in the JFK assassination to public scrutiny for the first time.

Yet Stokes came close to turning down O'Neill's offer to chair the committee when Rep. Henry Gonzalez, D-Tex., quit because of troubles with Sprague.

Persistent rumors in early 1977 that O'Neill and the House Democratic leadership were not actually supportive of the probe and that it might be killed by the House bothered Stokes.

Stokes went to O'Neill to check on the rumors and was assured of strong support from the Democratic leadership, providing Stokes could bring some sense to what was being billed as the "Gong Show" of Capitol Hill.

"There would have been no honor for me to preside over a dead horse," Stokes said.

An aide to O'Neill said the "very appreciation" of the job Stokes did and that the Cleveland Democrat had gained new stature in the House.

After a decade in the House Stokes, Ohio's first and only black elected representative, finally seems on the verge of fulfilling what his critics described as an unrealized potential.

Ten years ago when Stokes was sworn in as a House member the expectations for him were high, perhaps too high because of a last name made politically famous by brother Carl, the first elected black mayor of a major U.S. city.

Louis Stokes was elected to the House in 1968 on his first try at winning any public office. In fact in the 1960s Louis Stokes was a registered Republican and wasn't persuaded to become a Democrat until 1958 when Carl made an unsuccessful try for public office.

Rep. Stokes has been re-elected five times by whopping margins in the 21st Congressional District, where more than 20% of his constituents have incomes below the official poverty level.

His critics say they hope Stokes will use the prestige he has gained through the assassinations investigation to persuade the Carter administration to give more federal aid to Cleveland.

"Lou has never used his potentially powerful positions on the House Appropriations Committee to curry favor that can be used to get more federal aid for Cleveland," said a Stokes-watcher here.

Carl Stokes said his brother has always disliked the "murk and mire" of politics.

Louis Stokes recoils at such criticism and admits he is well aware his critics regard him both as "damn smart and lazy."

Stokes said, "When you say unrealized potential, I don't know what else I ought to be doing. I don't know how to answer that."

Perhaps the expectations were too high. Maybe the criticism results from Stokes' own view of his role in the Congress: that of a national representative of black America rather than merely a local congressman.

Because Stokes often takes a national perspective on issues, he appears to be putting himself above local issues, except when he endorsed Dennis J. Kucinich for Cleveland mayor. That move almost certainly was motivated more by his disenchantment with the local Democratic party organization than a love for the maverick Kucinich.

"You can't blame me for the failure of an administration in Cleveland," Stokes said. "All I can do for economic or community development assistance for Cleveland is play a role in getting laws passed."

"Cleveland gets a certain amount of money via a formula," he insisted. "Once community development money goes out to Cleveland I have no responsibility over how the money is spent."

"I've had to analyze how I see my role in the House," he said. "I see myself as representing a broad

minority constituency, not only in the district, but nationally."

Stokes' legislative record thus far is highlighted by his sponsoring of amendments — often successfully on the Appropriations Committee — to increase federal spending levels for social, welfare, educational and health programs that aid the disadvantaged.

Last year he battled the Carter administration over an amendment he sponsored to increase aid to education by \$100 million. Stokes won.

Stokes is regarded as unbeatable and his critics say he has become a hero because of his chairmanship of the assassinations committee.

Even though his opposition at the polls has been meager, Stokes raises thousands of dollars for re-election campaigns that draw yawns. Unlike Rep. Charles A. Vanik, D-22, who is a repeated show-in for re-election and raises no campaign funds from special interests, Stokes gets campaign contributions from such disparate

groups as labor unions, medical organizations, the tobacco industry, realtors, TRW, Inc. (which has a plant in his district), Baptist ministers and plain folks.

Stokes insisted he raises the campaign chest — in 1978 he took in some \$50,000 and spent \$38,000 — because he refuses to take reelection for granted.