

9-16-1982

Interview no. 544

The Great Debate: Gen. William Westmorel and Carl Strokes

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Interview with The Great Debate: Gen. William Westmorel and Carl Strokes by , 1982, "Interview no. 544,"
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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: THE GREAT DEBATE: Gen. William Westmoreland and
INTERVIEWER: Carl Stokes
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 16, 1982
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 544
TRANSCRIPT NO.: _____
TRANSCRIBER: _____
DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Former Army Chief of Staff debates with Cleveland's first Black Mayor and NBC Political analyst on defense spending and social programs. Included is a paper written by Kim Vernon based on the debate.

Length of Interview: 1 hour 40 min. Length of Transcript: _____

A Recreation and Critique of

THE GREAT DEBATE

between General William Childs Westmoreland and Carl Burton Stokes

September 16, 1982

The University of Texas at El Paso

Kim Vernon
Fall Semester, 1982

Mr. Tucker
Speech 3450

The Great Debate took place in El Paso, at the University of Texas campus on September 16, 1982. The opponents were General Westmoreland, advocating military spending, and Mr. Carl Stokes, advocating social spending.

An examination of the economic factors in El Paso and the United States during the period preceeding the debate explains the anticipation surrounding this event. Across the United States, unemployment had surpassed nine percent and was rapidly approaching the double digits; in El Paso, however, unemployment already exceeded eleven percent.¹ The unique location of El Paso as a border city with Mexico added tremendously to the effect of unemployment and the local business slump. In reality, El Paso unemployment was higher than eleven percent because Juarez citizens who normally found work in their sister city suffered from lay-offs, but were not counted in the statistics. Nevertheless, the loss of their American paychecks resulted in the loss of considerable sales for American businesses.

Obviously, the interest in Carl Stokes' position for social spending would be high. On the other hand, General Westmoreland's position for increased military spending was not without support. To begin with, the American public was still painfully aware of unrest in the Middle East and its effects on world markets; and the controversy in El Salvador had not been resolved, either. Furthermore, Americans had recently been shocked by the war between England and Argentina over the Falkland Islands. This brought the issue of military preparedness much closer to home. Other reasons for support of military spending arose from the fear and anger which resulted from the suppression of Solidarity in Poland. Finally, as economic hard times closed in on the nation, Americans, particularly those with college degrees in the making, began to

realize that their best chance for acquiring jobs in their field of study was through the military. At the same time, fellow Americans were rejoicing in the rejuvenation of the military ranks, which had been so greatly despised for lack of adequately trained and intelligent personnel in the late 1970's;² the addition of these young educated people was a blessing to the armed services. If military spending was to continue, at least it was attracting better educated and more qualified individuals than in the past.

Amidst this social setting retired General of the Army William Westmoreland arrived in El Paso, Texas, September 15th, held a brief press conference,³ toured the university, and prepared for the debate with the first black mayor of a major U.S. city. The ex-mayor of Cleveland, Carl Stokes, arrived in El Paso September 16th, held a press conference,⁴ and prepared to meet his debate opponent and acquaintance that evening.

The format of the debate allowed each man to address the audience for a limited period of time, and then allowed each to refute the other's arguments, or add whatever material he deemed necessary in a short rebuttal. After this phase, the audience was permitted to address either participant in a question and answer session. An alteration to this format occurred when Carl Stokes waived his rebuttal period.

In critiquing a speaker for overall effectiveness, the areas of delivery, credibility, and content must be examined. This study drew its conclusions from an overview of several different interactions with the speakers which included press conferences, informal interviews, the Great Debate, and a taped recording of the latter.⁵

The area of delivery includes general appearance, body action, voice, and mode of delivery. For General Westmoreland, these factors were altered with the changing modes of delivery, but Carl Stokes' deliv-

ery remained consistent, indifferent as to whether he appeared on television or before the general public.

General Westmoreland arrived at his press conference dressed in a pale, washed out blue and white wide-striped suit and red tie. One's first impression of his dress was anything but militaristic. In fact, his dress was leisurely and boyish in tone. One onlooker remarked, "he looks like Colonel Kentucky Fried Chicken." The general was well-groomed, and stood and sat in a manner which accented his five-foot eleven-and-a-half inch frame, making him appear much taller. The thinning hair, receding hairline, and shocks of white hair on the grey sides were signs of the General's aging; but the heavy eyebrows and lines of determinism throughout his face added a dignity and grace to his facial features. During the debate the following evening, General Westmoreland wore a conservative grey suit, light blue shirt and blue tie. This time there was no look of leisure, instead, his dress suggested an air of importance.

Carl Stokes arrived for his press conference the afternoon of the debate. He dressed in a traditionally conservative, grey pinstriped suit with blue shirt and matching tie of blue and red. This typified his impeccable "lawyer" image, and added dignity to his six foot, slightly overweight frame. His hair was styled in the short afro typical of black males. Carl Stokes came equipped with a large, sparkling smile, and an attitude which suggested he was eager to get down to business.

Body action concerns itself with the mannerisms, eye contact, and gestures the speaker displays. General Westmoreland exhibited some interesting body action during his press conference. He sat with legs crossed, shoulders open, and arms on the rests of his chair. He displayed a persistent manner of emphasis which Tim Hartman⁶ referred to as "shark bite." The General would crink his neck, bar his teeth, and pull

his lips back to the incisors. This most resembled the movements of one not used to wearing a neck tie. The night of the debate the General showed no signs of this repetitive cringing exercise, which suggested that he perhaps suffered from ear discomfort after his flight, and "shark bite" was his manner of clearing his ear passages. His gestures were limited almost exclusively to the right hand, about five inches above his chair or podium, depending upon the circumstances. Eye contact was sparse, and usually to his right, for two seconds or less. His largest gestures came during the impromptu question and answer period following the debate. At this time his gestures were higher, more visible, and more open.

Carl Stokes was seated casually at his press conference, legs crossed, with his glasses in the left hand, which was draped over the arm rest of his chair. He gestured repeatedly, with large open movements. Both hands were frequently used to illustrate his points. He had a tendency to lean forward slightly when explaining his answers. He answered his questioners directly, with concentrated eye contact; nevertheless, he was able to include the remaining members of the room in the conversation by individual, swift eye contacts. During the debate Carl Stokes exhibited some playful mannerisms, but it was quite obvious that he was aware of the audience's attention, even though General Westmoreland was at the podium. Mr. Stokes tended to smile a lot, and laugh heartily out loud at the General's anecdotes.⁷ At times he assumed a serious position of note taking and careful listening, and once he expressed a look of disgust while his opponent reiterated the need for defense spending. His eye contact with the audience during this period was most interesting — sometimes he looked directly at the audience, at other times he seemed to look beyond them, toward the back doors, as if absorbed in thought.

When Carl Stokes approached the podium, his entourage of mannerisms went with him. He had a tendency to pick or pull at his right ear, his gestures were large, his facial expressions abundant, and his eye contact continued almost unendingly. Sometimes he placed one hand in his pant pocket and if he had his glasses in his possession, he tended to take them on and off more frequently than was necessary, perhaps for emphasis. He tended to step out the left side of the podium. Particularly noticeable was the use of his entire body to emphasize a point. When he spoke of Americans "below the poverty level," he not only used hand gestures in a downward movement, his entire figure sank a few inches at the word "below." This uniformity of body movement was prominent several times during his speech.

The most interesting aspect of General Westmoreland's voice was its change from the press conference to the debate, and from the debate to the tape recording. At the press conference the General's voice was somewhat monotone; he had a tendency to begin his sentences at an elevated volume, then he let them dissolve until they were nearly indistinguishable, much like a mumble. The General barely opened his mouth to speak, the parted lip area rarely exceeded a quarter inch. The mumbled sentences were not present during the debate; and although the overall effect was not monotone, the General used very little voice variation. During certain sentences one could detect a slight east coast accent. Surprisingly, General Westmoreland sounded much better on tape than he did in person, but this may be true only because the tape was taken from the audio box, where audience interferences such as coughing, talking, and moving could not distract from the vocal quality and strength of his voice.

Wayne Minnick says, "the nonverbal part of the voice—its quality, pitch, rate, intensity, and inflection—is language in itself, aiding in

the interpretation of the words we utter."⁸ Carl Stokes used these non-verbal parts to his advantage; his projected voice was alive with emotion and variation, sometimes forceful and demanding, sometimes painful and compassionate. He projected well at all times, and these qualities were also prevalent on the tape recording.

As mentioned earlier, the modes of delivery varied. The press conference took place in a room approximately ten by fifteen feet with twelve people present; the debate took place in Magoffin Auditorium at the U.T. El Paso campus, which seats twelve hundred.⁹ Attendance was recorded at six hundred ninety that evening. Lester Thonnsen states, "delivery is of course closely related to speech preparation."¹⁰ This explains the difference in General Westmoreland's effectiveness during his speech and afterwards, during the question and answer period. Wayne Minnick claims, "many people have trouble reading a speech without the loss of desirable variety and flexibility in voice usage."¹¹ General Westmoreland used five by eight notecards during his speech. In an informal interview he said that his opening remarks were the result of the integration of parts of different speeches, some of which he had given several times. This explains the General's poor eye contact and lack of adequate hand gestures—he was simply too busy "reading" his speech to develop other areas of his delivery. During the question and answer period, however, when the General gave impromptu answers, his gestures were noticeably more frequent, more open, and his eye contact was excellent. His voice was also more forceful than before.

Carl Stokes said he rarely used note cards, but mentioned that for the debate, "out of respect for General Westmoreland, I wrote my remarks." He added that normally, a debate would require about eighty percent written and twenty percent impromptu material. If Carl Stokes

used note cards, except at those times when he specified he was reading an excerpt, it was not noticeable. It is possible, however, that he had an outline of the major points he wished to cover, but at no time did Carl Stokes "read" his remarks. Carl Stokes' performance during the press conference, the debate, and the question-answer session proves Thomnsen's theory that knowledge of the subject matter as well as proper preparation are the secrets to successful delivery.

The second area to critique for overall effectiveness is ethical proof, or credibility. "People who are intelligent, are of good character, and appear to be trustworthy and well disposed toward us are highly credible sources, and we tend to believe what they say."¹² Carl Stokes establishes his credibility through the use of the statement, "I am a labor lawyer" and the underlying implication that he deals directly with the "decay from within" with which every American should concern himself. Much of his ethos is established when he puts himself on common ground with the audience. He accomplishes this by referring to family medical bills he recently incurred, by speaking emotionally about what hard economic times are doing to families, and by reminding the audience that the economy touches everyone, not just those of a particular race. All these things helped Mr. Stokes to appear trustworthy and of good character. He even goes so far as to say "vanity" is the reason he tries to read without his glasses, which hits home with the audience. His actions and remarks are straightforward and simple, so that he appears as a man who is genuinely interested in the welfare of the people. He brushes aside any claims to intelligence or superiority, as is obvious by his first remarks about the difference between generals and mayors in controlling their subordinates. This makes him

appear more humble. Moreover, Carl Stokes refers to his opponent with the utmost of respect, thereby elevating the position of both men.

General Westmoreland opened his remarks by reminding the audience that he helped promote the first woman to brigadier general, but he left one with the impression that he did so for political reasons. If his good will toward women was in doubt, his intelligence certainly was not. Audience members were reminded by the master of ceremonies of the General's military expertise and service to the country, so that his credibility as someone knowledgeable about U.S. military strength and Russian capabilities had already been established. General Westmoreland conceded his inexperience as a public speaker, which helped establish some common ground with the audience. Throughout his speech the General quoted Abraham Lincoln, who was himself a man of great character and good will. Perhaps this technique of name-dropping helped the audience overcome any earlier hostility toward the General. "An audience displays the tendency to accept a persuasive communication because of the respect and admiration they have for the person who is communicating."¹³ This is probably also true for the person who is quoting the respected individual. If General Westmoreland seemed a bit prejudiced against women, his intelligence and already established good character and trustworthiness balanced the scales in his favor, thereby establishing his ethos with the audience.

The final area of critiquing overall effectiveness concerns itself with the content of the speeches. This area examines both the evidence of support and the appeals used by the speakers. The content of the Great Debate speeches was more easily interpreted from the tapes than from the live performance, as a more careful study was possible due to the nature of tape recordings. The reason this careful content analysis was needed was two-fold; first, General Westmoreland's overall delivery

was poor, making the prepared speech extremely difficult to follow; second, Carl Stokes' ability to stimulate the audience made his arguments appear more logical. Martin bryan says, "delivery is poor when it fails to communicate the speaker's ideas and feelings with maximum effectiveness."¹⁴ Westmoreland's audience was lost after the first five or ten minutes, simply because he could not hold their interest. On the other hand, Carl Stokes was so successful with his delivery that the audience had little or no time to examine the thrust of his arguments. But a careful review of the arguments and the supporting evidence shows that Carl Stokes had little leverage from which to argue besides personal opinion and conviction.¹⁵ Likewise, Westmoreland's inability to effectively confront Stokes' position did little to further his own sound arguments.

Carl Stokes' arguments may have appeared valid because they appealed to common sense and emotion. Sometimes emotional arguments are as valid as logical arguments, particularly if the subject is one in which factual evidence is difficult to produce. A review of the tape showed that from the standpoint of logical, well-supported arguments, Carl Stokes' position was weak as compared to General Westmoreland's, yet his emotional appeals apparently satisfied the audience. Conversely, General Westmoreland's arguments appeared more intelligent and were more easily followed on tape, probably because his poor delivery did not interfere with what he had to say.

Stokes' basic argument behind his position to support social spending was based on his belief that internal decay was more of a threat to Americans than external forces. Carl Stokes states that the "issue is not whether America must have a strong defense, because the answer to that is categorically yes, but rather, do we already have a sufficiently strong national defense." Logically, then, he would need only prove that a strong national defense did exist. He referred only to a military spending bill

Texas senator John Tower did not support as evidence that national defense was strong. He based his assumption on the fact that Senator Tower, as chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, would know as well as or better than anyone else about the state of national defense. The remainder of Carl Stokes' arguments in favor of social spending rested on current statistics of unemployment, figures which indicated that one of every six families was now dependent on the government for some type of aid, and the underlying assumption that these trends would continue unless the government provided the necessary jobs and job retraining to stimulate the economy.

General Westmoreland's logical proof was reinforced with statistics concerning neglected military spending over the past fifteen years, which he explained, had resulted in a poorly equipped military force, while Russia had, in the meantime, steadily built its arms arsenal. The General also make an emotional appeal—fear—of blackmail by the USSR, but he stated plainly that this fear was a reality and listed three reasons for his concern. This was his strongest argument for increased military spending, and one which proved to be particularly valid. He referred constantly to the Cuban missile crises of 1962 as proof why military strength and superiority are essential to the United States and the free world. He drew an analogy between the crises of 1962 and today, by explaining that the Russians pulled out of Cuba only because they knew U.S. military strength exceeded their own; he theorized that the same event today would be disastrous, because the U.S. could not assert any military authority over Russia. Furthermore, General Westmoreland cited several instances in which Russia recently asserted itself with little or no consequences: Afghanistan, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Then he asked the question, "is our need for strength indeed real?" and

began to quote world leaders whose opinions indicated a definite need for military strength equal to or greater than that of the Soviet Union. Perhaps the only assumption the audience had to make was that the USSR had surpassed the United States in military abilities, but enough information had been available earlier in the year to support this proposition. In answer to Carl Stokes' comments, General Westmoreland states, "you want to open us up to blackmail, to cutting off our sources of raw material...our standard of living will drop." Besides this fear motivator, the General appealed to the American sense of pride when he said he did not believe in a welfare state where Americans became dependent upon the government for daily necessities. Rather, he wanted to lift the burden of welfare from the government and place it on the private sector.

From the standpoint of logical proof, General Westmoreland's remarks were more valid than Stokes' because they were substantiated with evidence, not just emotion and assumption.¹⁶

The Great Debate was not a true debate in the sense that it had no winner and no loser. Both men could have improved their positions, General Westmoreland could have improved his delivery, particularly in the areas of eye contact, gesture, and voice; Carl Stokes could have improved his content by addressing the issue more directly and by supporting his arguments with logical proof. As both men reminded the audience, each was interested in the welfare of the American people, only their techniques of assuring freedom and comfort to Americans differed. Perhaps their fundamental arguments were not aimed at persuading the audience, but were intended to stimulate thought and discussion among the audience members. If this were the case, then both men were probably successful in their endeavors.

FOOTNOTES

¹The El Paso Times, September 22, 1982, p. 1.

²See "Too Few Good Men" Seth Cropsey (Harpers: Dec., 1979, p. 16) or "It Just Isn't Working" Harry A. Marmion (Commonwealth: Oct., 12, 1979, p. 555)

³American Airlines V.I.P. Lounge at the El Paso International Airport, 4:40 p.m.

⁴Ibid., 2:50 p.m.

⁵"The Great Debate" is on flie at the Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

⁶KDEC News, Channel 4, El Paso, Texas. (CBS affiliate)

⁷Many anecdotes refer to the lawsuit by General Westmoreland against CBS News. See Anatomy of a Smear (TV Guide: May 29, 1982)

⁸Wayne Minnick, Public Speaking, p. 127.

⁹See Appendix A for a sketch of the stage.

¹⁰Lester Thonnsen, Speech Criticism, p. 522.

¹¹Wayne Minnick, ibid., p. 134.

¹²Ibid., p. 183

¹³Ibid., p. 182

¹⁴Martin Bryan, Dynamic Speaking, p. 207.

¹⁵See Appendix B for Carl Stokes' arguments.

¹⁶See Appendix C for General Westmoreland's arguments.

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