



# CHARLES STENVIG: THE MAKING OF A MAYOR

**The legacy of the policeman turned mayor who fought Minneapolis crime and establishment politicians.**

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By John Phelan

**I**t wasn't supposed to happen. On June 11, 1969, the *Minneapolis Tribune* reported, "Charles Stenvig, a political independent and a police detective, completed a surprising drive to power by defeating Republican Dan Cohen Tuesday to win election as mayor of Minneapolis." The *Tribune* continued, "Stenvig, 41, overwhelmed Cohen, who is president of the City Council... The Stenvig share of the votes was 61.8 percent."

Stenvig, the *Tribune* explained, "ran an unconventional campaign that consisted of virtually no media advertising and that relied heavily on personal contacts by the candidate. He cruised the city in a 1940 sound truck and attempted to blanket all wards with lawn signs... He had no paid staff." His campaign "reported donations of \$14,971 and disbursements of \$7,997 and unpaid obligations of \$3,314." Cohen's campaign, meanwhile, "showed expenditures of \$36,797" and "was headed by five paid staffers, including... a campaign consultant from Washington, D.C." Stenvig's opponent "advertised widely in the broadcast media and on billboards" and was endorsed by "President Nixon, Minnesota Gov. Harold LeVander and a committee of city DFLers."

It wasn't supposed to happen. So how did it?

Mayor Stenvig, left of center, with Police Chief Basil Lutz, Deputy Chief Gordon Johnson, and school Superintendent Dr. John B. Davis, among others, 1969.



## Minneapolis in the 1960s

By 1969, Arthur Naftalin had served as mayor of Minneapolis for eight years. A former professor at the University of Minnesota, Naftalin exemplified the liberal ideology of governance, as academics Jeffrey T. Manuel and Andrew Urban — authors of a study on Stenvig's political and policing philosophy — define it, "was to use social science and technology to shape the city and its population."

But many Minneapolitans were losing faith in this creed for one main reason: crime. Between 1960 and 1969, Minnesota's population increased by seven percent but murders rose by 90 percent, robberies by 220 percent, aggravated assaults by 436 percent, and rapes by 451 percent. Much of this was concentrated in the Twin Cities, and working class residents were disproportionately affected. In 1968, "lawbreaking" in Minneapolis rose 16 percent from the previous year. In two months in 1969, south Minneapolis, comprising just six percent of the city's land area, accounted for 26 percent of its street crimes. Betty Wood, a housewife, told the *Tribune* that her family was "carrying guns from fear of crime."

The issue of crime was mixed with that of race. In 1950, less than two percent of Minneapolis residents were black. That rose to eight percent in 1960 but blacks accounted for 21 percent of all arrests. A city report called for formal mechanisms for civilian complaints regarding police prejudice and brutality, the hiring of black officers, and the establishment of a civilian oversight body. This was defeated, but an increasingly common complaint was that liberal policies were preventing the police from maintaining law and order. A letter in the *Tribune* said: "It seems that [Naftalin's] administration has created a legion of untouchables and no warrant can be served, regardless of the seriousness of the

crime, because of interference from high authority."

While the rest of the country was rocked by race riots in the latter half of the 1960s, Minnesota had escaped the violence. Senator Walter Mondale boasted to his colleagues, "No such thing could happen in Minnesota." But the peaceful bubble burst in July 1967. In *Minneapolis: An Urban Biography*, Tom Weber explains:

*On July 19th, an argument broke out during Minneapolis's Aquatennial Torchlight Parade, which led to accusations that a black woman had been mistreated. As a crowd of African Americans walking up from the parade site converged on Plymouth Avenue, violence erupted. Someone set the Knox Food Market, a Jewish business, on fire, and someone threw Molotov cocktails at the home of the local alderman.*

*[Community leaders] encouraged Naftalin not to have the police sweep the street. The National Guard was called in to maintain order but also to be a calmer force than the city's own cops, many of whom wanted to take a harder line. After sporadic incidents the second night, a peaceful dance held at The Way helped calm the neighborhood enough to end the unrest. No one died, but several people were injured and several businesses, many Jewish owned, were vandalized or destroyed.*

The riots were a blow to Minnesota's self-image, and two years later Naftalin decided not to run again. Charles Stenvig made his move.

## Chuck

Stenvig was born in Minneapolis in 1928 and grew up on the south side of the city. He attended Roosevelt High where he won a Minnesota state high school boys' golf championship, then served in the Army. With his G.I. Bill benefits, he attended Augsburg College and graduated with a degree in sociology in 1951. Even

with a college degree, he was ambivalent about “book learning.” “My mother said one of us kids had to go to college, and I was it,” he explained. “So I got done in three years, got [out] of there fast.” He joined the Minneapolis Police Department as a patrolman, made detective in 1964, and was elected president of the police federation in 1966. He was a militant in his methods and in his political activism in defense of the police: In 1967, he led a march on City Hall demanding higher wages, even blocking the building’s entry and exit. When the sheriff’s department moved to break the ongoing blockade weeks later, Stenvig threatened, “I don’t know who you are but you are going to get your head knocked.”

## 1969 – Crime

To Stenvig, “experts” like Naftalin were destroying Minneapolis and people with practical experience were needed to save it. “People are sick and tired of politicians and intellectuals,” he said. “They want an average workingman from the community to represent them — and that’s me.”

Stenvig could boast of his front line experience battling crime. He promised to “stop it before it starts” by utilizing proactive policing and not “wait for burning and looting.” A popular campaign slogan at the time was “Take the Handcuffs of the Police.”

Accusations of racism followed. Cohen called Stenvig “nothing more than George Wallace in Minneapolis clothes” and accused him of peddling “a thinly veiled kind of racism.” Stenvig worked hard to neutralize this, declining Wallace’s offer to campaign with him, saying, “Both George Wallace and I believe in strict law enforcement...but after that our views separate.” In his inaugural speech, he proclaimed, “Color should not be a cause of harassment, not a shield from wrongdoing.” This colorblind approach to public safety proved popular.

Class, not race, was Stenvig’s stock-in-trade, and wealthy white liberals were his favorite target, whether they were on campus or in the suburbs. Speaking of the periodic riots at the



(Right): Members of the Minnesota National Guard patrol Plymouth Ave. in Minneapolis following riots in 1967. (Left): The remains of several buildings on Plymouth Ave.

University of Minnesota, Stenvig said, “I’ve seen those demonstrators and I’ve sometimes had to look awfully hard for a black American among them.” The students responded with an editorial in the *Minnesota Daily*, the university’s newspaper, describing Stenvig’s victory as a triumph of “a shallow brand of law-and-order” over the “intelligent leadership of Arthur Naftalin.”

Stenvig went further, attacking “the power structure from Wayzata” who were “afraid they’ll have a working man as mayor.” John Cowles, Jr., publisher of Minneapolis’s two major newspapers, was a particular target. Of the *Minneapolis Star*, Stenvig told the League of Women Voters, “you know what Star spells backwards.” Again, the press pushed back, but his campaign manager, Milton Bix, argued that, “the majority of the people in Minneapolis do not follow the editorial policy of the *Star* and *Tribune*... the people view the paper as a tool of the power interest in Minneapolis. The people wanted someone to represent them. A number of people told us they would have not voted for Stenvig had the paper not endorsed Dan Cohen.”

Stenvig’s style and populism proved especially appealing to blue collar Minneapolitans. An analysis in the

*Tribune* noted that Stenvig “attracted voters who have not participated in Minneapolis elections for many years.” It went on: “In overwhelmingly Republican precincts, Stenvig ran considerably behind Naftalin, but in those with the strongest DFL allegiance, he almost equaled the mayor’s totals... The strongest DFL neighborhoods gave Stenvig 66 to 74 percent of their vote.” Stenvig “received 50 percent of the vote in precincts of higher-than-average income, 68 percent where the income level was average or below.” He received 70 percent of all union ballots.

Stenvig’s victory surprised Minnesota’s political Babbitts like Mondale. One reporter noted that Minneapolis’s political experts “couldn’t believe law and order [was] a viable issue in [Minneapolis] and a state where civil and human rights organizations, religious and secular, multiply and feed on each other.”

## 1971 – Schools

Stenvig went into the 1971 election with an 85 percent approval rating, but his opponent, the DFL’s Harry Davis and the first black candidate for the office, had substantial backing from the Minneapolis business community and comfortably outspent his opponents.

But Davis sat on the school board, which had recently adopted a plan to desegregate the city’s schools by “pairing” economically similar and contiguous neighborhood schools. Polls found 87 percent of Twin Cities residents believed that interracial mixing at school



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produced benefits, but they also found that the favored methods were “magnet schools” or one-way busing, bringing black students to majority white schools. “Pairing” was the least popular option — 62 percent opposed it — and infuriated Stenvig’s working class base: It was their schools, not those of Davis’s well-off backers, to be scheduled for integration first. One school board meeting drew so much interest that it lasted from 5 p.m. to 5 a.m.

Stenvig’s argument from 1969 had fresh appeal: Intellectual and economic elites were imposing policies on others without having to bear the costs. A labor leader explained, “The guy next door [who] works like a dog all day...comes home and worries all night — taxes, mortgages, wages, the whole bit. So he picks up a paper or he watches TV and there’s some big shot telling him what to do. Quite frankly he resented it.”

Because of the appeal of Stenvig’s argument and intense pressure from their members, labor unions officially backed a non-DFL candidate for the first time. The United Auto Workers were the only major union not to: They remained neutral.

At the end of an ugly racially charged campaign, Stenvig was reelected with 71 percent of the vote. His supporters, organized as the “T Party,” won their school board elections. Newly elected members Marilyn Borea and Philip Olson said, “We feel the unheard voice of the public is now heard.”

## Downfall

Getting elected was one thing, governing was another, and Stenvig faced bitter opposition from

Republicans who held 10 of the council’s 13 seats. “Almost no programs emanate from Stenvig’s walnut-paneled suite,” one reporter noted, with the mayor vetoing almost every bill presented by the council. A Republican councilor complained, “I don’t think Stenvig is even trying to provide leadership in the traditional sense,” instead he was “acting as a spokesman for what’s called the Silent Majority.” Stenvig insisted that these vetoes were “affirmative” because “the people have had it up to here with government and it was time to put a stop to it.”

With the city council keeping a tight rein on his political agenda, Stenvig indulged his flair for stunts. He pushed the Minneapolis public library to remove publications such as *Rolling Stone*, *Black Panther*, and *New Left Notes* because they advocated drug use, disrespect for authority figures, and violence against the police. He eliminated any external oversight of the police department, including an early incarnation of the Civilian Review Commission. He was also mired in scandal when attempts to leverage his office for financial reward, whether legal or illegal, came to light. Minneapolitans began to sour on him.

Meanwhile, the alliance of the business community, wealthier voters, minority voters, and the DFL — which had been the basis of Harry Davis’s candidacy — persisted. The Republican Party withered. Meanwhile, many of Stenvig’s white, working class base were moving to the suburbs: Minneapolis’s population fell by 14 percent during the 1970s. Even the police federation was changing. In 1973, Stenvig ran for office without the

endorsement of the police federation for the first time, partly because new, college-educated officers rejected his approach. To Donald Dwyer, who briefly served as police chief, Stenvig represented “the old, historical hard-nosed cop versus quite a lot of idealism in a younger, far better educated group who are disenchanted with the present administration.” Stenvig was defeated by the DFL’s Albert Hofstede.

Stenvig didn’t receive lucrative employment offers when he left office, so he went back on the beat until he ran and was reelected mayor in 1975. However, Hofstede beat him again in 1977, and in 1979 he was defeated by Don Fraser.

Historian Jeffrey Bloodworth wrote in his book *Losing the Center: The Decline of American Liberalism, 1968-1992*,

*From the time of his 1971 reelection, Stenvig engaged in a series of outlandish political theatrics that undermined his movement... He could have reoriented DFL liberalism back toward its working class roots or moved these voters into the GOP’s ranks. Instead, he self-destructed. As a result, New Politics liberals in Minnesota were spared any substantial soul searching. Freed from this, they dismissed the Stenvig phenomenon as a meaningless product of personality and circumstance.*

After his 1979 defeat, Stenvig made a bid to become ambassador to Norway in 1980, citing his “100 percent Norwegian” heritage. He also appeared on the television game show *Family Feud*. In 1982 he ran for Hennepin County Sheriff and lost. He moved to Sun City, Ariz., in the late 1980s where he struggled to find anyone to play golf with because “he was too good and no one wanted to take him on,” his son explained. His hometown tried to forget him but his reputation for law and order and loyalty to his working-class roots persisted. In 1993, Lori Sturdevant noted in the *Star Tribune* that the “mention of that name — Charlie Stenvig — still sends a shudder through the city’s progressive hearts.” Stenvig died in 2010 at age 82. He remains the last non-DFL mayor of Minneapolis. ★