

## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### *Notes and Comment*

WHEN Allard K. Lowenstein died, last week, of gunshot wounds that are alleged to have been inflicted by a onetime colleague in the civil-rights movement of the nineteen-sixties, there was a deeper, more widespread, and more passionate sense of loss in the American political community than could be accounted for by the brief eminence he achieved as a congressman, or even by the considerable size of his accomplishment, which included probably indispensable contributions to the civil-rights movement and to the antiwar movement. It was not easy to define what he had been. Although he had clearly been a public man, devoted to the public good, he did not fit the customary mold of a politician. He had served for a term in Congress, but one did not tend to think of him primarily as a congressman—nor did he think of himself that way. In 1969, shortly after being elected, he confessed to a reporter, “I never think of myself as a congressman. I’m sometimes surprised when people remind me that I am one.” He also said to the reporter, “There is nothing inherently immoral about trying to succeed, and in politics this society’s idea of success is to get yourself elected. But once that has become the goal, all the other values and goals can be forgotten. The test of virtue becomes success, and people measure success by whether you get more votes. . . . So why shouldn’t you think first about how to get more votes? So that becomes the ‘first rule’ of that kind of politics. It’s also what makes the whole process so much less productive and honest. If you don’t want to fall into that trap, you have to say no, you won’t accept that view of things. My first rule in Congress is that if I don’t do more by being there about the things I care about than I would if I weren’t there, then I shouldn’t be

there.” He was not there long, but that was because he lost his bid for reelection after his district had been gerrymandered to exclude many of his supporters; and he never did manage to win elective office again. Yet it would be impossible to class him among those who, while holding fast to their ideals, never manage to put them into practice: the barriers of segregation were breached and the politics of the South was transformed; the Vietnam War did finally come to an end. In their tributes to him, his friends from the political world acknowledged his peculiar effectiveness. Representative Andrew Jacobs, Jr., called him “a gentle tornado.” Senator Edward Kennedy called him “a one-man demonstration for civil rights,” and said, “With his endless energy, with his papers, his clothes, his books, and seemingly his whole life jammed into briefcases, envelopes, and satchels—all of it carried with him everywhere—he was a portable and powerful lobby for progressive principles.” William F. Buckley, Jr., described him as being “in our time the original activist.” Though Lowenstein, who was as scrupulous in his political means as he was selfless in his ends, did not survive long in office, few men were more profoundly devoted to the American political system than he. Allying himself with movements that were born on the street, he led them into electoral politics, thus both diverting them from possible violence and refreshing the

mainstream with new thought and energy. But it was not with the aim of restraining angry activists that he led his supporters into electoral politics (that would have been nothing more than what radicals of the nineteen-sixties used to call co-optation); it was to bring their causes, in which he strongly believed, to fruition. It’s often said that politics is the art of the possible. Lowenstein, ceaselessly busy in outlying regions of what is usually recognized as “politics,” shifted the boundaries of the possible, so that other, more “political” men could bring it into being.

