



James A. Wechsler

A RARE COALITION

In the course of modern human events there have been few occasions on which Bill Buckley and I have found ourselves on the same side of the political barricades. But that historic circumstance, if I may so describe it, is only one manifestation of the remarkable coalition rallied behind Allard Lowenstein in his uphill battle to unseat an undistinguished, uninspired Republican-Conservative Congressman named John Wydler in Nassau County's Fifth District.

I doubt that there is any other contest in the country in which such divergent voices as Rep. Andy Young and Leonard Garment, Coretta King and Rita Hauser, Sen. Henry Jackson and Gov. Jerry Brown, the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association and Americans for Democratic Action—by name only a fraction of Lowenstein's broad spectrum of sponsors—have joined hands to support a candidate whose commitments to Democratic progressivism have never wavered. Equally startling have been expressions of support from Republican notables in the area.

Clearly neither Bill Buckley nor others on this roster who differ with Lowenstein on many issues have modified their own convictions. What has brought them to his side is a generous recognition of his rationality and decency and, to quote Buckley, "his extraordinary integrity and sense of justice." During the term he served in the House (before he was gerrymandered out of office and later defeated in dubious fashion by the Rooney machine in Brooklyn), he similarly earned the esteem of conservative adversaries.

For Lowenstein this is not a campaign lightly undertaken. He had been defeated before in the same district, known as "safe" Republican territory. His financial resources were sadly limited. He was keenly aware that another setback, no matter how explicable in terms of the unfavorable battleground, would almost certainly be construed as his last hurrah in the conventional political arena (at age 45). There was no issue comparable to Vietnam, which catapulted him into national headlines.

Ironically, however, he has mobilized an infinitely wider degree of support than before. The clearest evidence of its impact is the frenzy of the counter-attack mounted by Wydler's camp. While Wydler has steadfastly refused to engage in direct public debate, his managers have conceded that the contest is now a horse race.

Stocked by Bill Buckley's endorsement of Lowenstein, they hastily produced Sen. Jim Buckley to engage in fraternal argument, but that predictable move primarily underlined the jitters of the Wydler forces. Subsequently they have waged a campaign of smear and fear that may backfire; it is too reminiscent of an era of "dirty tricks."

Thus Lowenstein, for example, has been portrayed as "anti-Israel" because, on complicated votes in the House dealing with the Pentagon budget, he refused to let appropriations for Israel be used as a cover for handouts to oppressive tyrannies. But Sen. Jackson's appearances on Lowenstein's behalf have largely deflated that spurious issue.

Wydler's literature has also branded Lowenstein a "professional agitator" guilty of seeking to return to Congress "so he can travel around the country looking for ways to foment discord." It is, in fact, a matter of record that in his crusade to end the U. S. involvement in Vietnam, Lowenstein was the frequent target of ultra-leftist attack because he firmly rejected tactics of violence and disruption.

But he admittedly cannot plead innocent to the charge that he has been deeply involved in great national debates often transcending the immediacies of the district. He has never viewed the affairs of Nassau County's 5th CD as separable from the state and fate of the nation.

Wydler certainly cannot be accused of any comparable vision. He has been a mediocre, largely inaudible Congressman through seven dull terms. In larger affairs he may be remembered most for his last-ditch apologies for Richard Nixon long after most men had recognized that the moment of truth had arrived. He was similarly slow-witted about detecting the dimensions of the Vietnam disaster.

A journalistic footnote to the contest seems warranted, especially in view of the closeness of the race.

Some time ago Newsday announced (in conformity with a decision of its parent corporation, the Los Angeles Times) that it would abandon the practice of endorsing candidates. Its explanation was that editorial neutrality was vital to public confidence in its news columns.

My own view at that time was that the decision was a form of abdication. It seems to me a newspaper's responsibility is to declare itself where it believes real issues have been drawn. The notion that a failure to endorse insures the inerrability of news reports is at once an innocence and a pretension.

But even if non-endorsement remains a matter of policy at Newsday (the Long Island Press has endorsed Lowenstein) the level of Wydler's campaign and his flight from debate are surely valid subjects of comment—especially in a newspaper that has often generalized about lofty campaign standards. When does "neutrality" become absurdity?