

BOOK REVIEW

A hatchet-job biography of the liberal Lowenstein

"THE PIED PIPER: Allard K. Lowenstein and the Liberal Dream," by Richard Cummings. Grove Press, 569 pp., \$19.95.

By Dan Cryer
Newsday Book Critic

Allard K. Lowenstein was the drum major for mid-century American liberalism. Wherever the action was, from his student days at the University of North Carolina in the late '40s until his assassination in 1980, there was the indefatigable Lowenstein: leading the National Student Association, campaigning for Congress in New York City and Long Island, battling segregation in Mississippi and apartheid in South Africa, championing democracy in Spain, opposing U.S. participation in the Vietnam War, organizing the "Dump Johnson" movement in 1968 and serving as U.S. ambassador to the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Richard Cummings, a Long Island lawyer and writer, believes that the Lowenstein resume has been incomplete. In "The Pied Piper," he charges that between 1962 and 1967 Lowenstein was an operative for the Central Intelligence Agency.

After study of Lowenstein's letters and diaries at the University of North Carolina and extensive interviews with the activist's family and associates, Cummings concludes that Lowenstein's "deep sense of patriotism and extreme anti-Communism led him to work for the CIA in Africa and Spain and to inform on suspected Communists in the civil rights movement."

Despite these alleged departures from Lowenstein's liberal principles, Cummings claims to have deep respect for the man's commitment to nonviolent social reform. Nonsense. "The Pied Piper" is nothing less than a hatchet job aimed at a good and complicated man.

A classic example of McCarthyism of the Left, "The Pied Piper" relies on a vicious guilt-by-association. Since Cummings can't prove his thesis, he toys with the facts, defies logic, defames with innuendo, subjects historical documents to the most unlikely of interpretations. Many of the people he has interviewed claim in affidavits that their views have been twisted wildly out of context.

Were it not for the publicity already generated by this book, it would not be worth reviewing.

The CIA charge is an old one, first trotted out by '60s student radicals furious that Lowenstein wanted them to work for change within the existing political system. He had been, after all, president of the National Student Association in 1959 when it was, we later learned, the recipient of secret CIA subsidies. But Cummings has no evidence that Lowenstein knew of this aid or that it affected his already pro-liberal, anti-communist views.

Lowenstein's frequent trips to Spain and South Africa throughout the '60s and '70s, the author charges, were paid for by the CIA. How else could a man making only modest salaries have afforded the enormous travel expenses?

Presumably, Lowenstein's progressive credentials gave him a splendid cover and allowed him to influence

radical movements in a noncommunist direction. He was, in this view, point man for a liberal wing of the CIA that accepted the inevitability of revolution in many parts of the world but wished to keep radical movements out of the communist camp.

Never mind that Cummings has no reliable evidence tying his man to the CIA. We are expected to take the word of "sources with background in intelligence work." Never mind that the author also informs us that Lowenstein grew up in a wealthy family and that his father left a \$10 million estate in the mid-'60s.

Never mind that there is no need to resort to a conspiracy theory to explain Lowenstein's liberal anticommunism; like many liberals of his time he believed communism was as much the enemy as right-wing totalitarianism. Never mind that, according to FBI documents, the bureau kept watch on this "dangerous man" all his adult life. Never mind that his bisexuality, revealed in David Harris' "Dreams Die Hard" (1982), made him an unlikely candidate for the blackmail-prone world of espionage.

Al Lowenstein was the kind of restless reformer whose oratory inspired antiwar students and whose ambition pushed him to run (or consider running) for Congress in four different New York districts. He rebuked U.S. embassy officials in Madrid for not working harder to get rid of Franco and hectored South Africans for clinging to apartheid. Never was such a loose cannon so recklessly "employed" by an intelligence agency.

Lowenstein's civil rights work centered on the voter registration drives of the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964. From his diaries, we know that he was torn between a commitment to reform and a fear that possible communist involvement would discredit the movement, but Cummings can cite no evidence at all that Lowenstein informed on anyone to any government agency. Instead, the author reads sinister implications into entries such as this one from Lowenstein's odd newspaper-headline style diary: "Problem Rises of Who to Tell How Much."

Along with all the reputation-mugging, Cummings' biography gives us glimpses into Lowenstein's personal life. We learn about his immigrant Jewish father who took a PhD in chemistry at Columbia University before going into the restaurant business, the mother who died when Al was a baby, a brilliant brother who had to be hospitalized for mental illness, and Allard's wife, Jenny Lyman, a dissenter from the conventions of her Boston Brahmin family.

Lowenstein was on the road as much as he was home, and the marriage later broke up. Reform's insistent call kept him away, but so, too, Cummings believes, did an inability to come to terms with his sexuality. "Part of his frenetic activity," observes longtime associate Curtis Gans, "was his escape from himself."

There is truth in this view, and truth also in the conclusion that the multifaceted Allard Lowenstein has eluded Richard Cummings, a biographer with the instincts of an assassin.