

Books

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Book about Al Lowenstein unjustified, unjustifiable

DREAMS DIE HARD

By David Harris

(St. Martin's/Marek, \$14.95).

By Ronnie Dugger

THIS UNPLEASANT BOOK is a celebration of an assassin and a depreciation of his victim. If this seems strange, that's because it is. David Harris' *Dreams Die Hard* is in effect an attempt to assassinate Al Lowenstein's reputation.

Lowenstein, who was a friend of mine, was an activist leader in humanist causes all his life. He was the president of the National Students' Association and head of Students for Stevenson in 1952. He helped plan the "Mississippi Summer" that crystallized the civil rights movement of the early 1960s, joined the opposition to the Vietnam war, and led the "Dump Johnson" movement. Elected to Congress, he was promptly gerrymandered out of his House seat, and although he lost his subsequent attempts to return to office, he kept on fighting for worthwhile ideas and policies.

He was committed to peaceful reform within the democratic system, and therefore when necessary he opposed more radical means of change. For instance, he concluded at one point (by which time obviously he was right) that the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, had become destructive, radical, increasingly racist, and insufficiently anti-communist, and he said all these things. Therefore he came to be contemptuously hated by some young people on his left.

ONE OF THESE was Dennis Sweeney, who had started out as one of Lowenstein's student proteges in Mississippi, but turned to draft resistance and then veered into ideological violence. Finally Sweeney descended into clinical madness, and in 1980 he walked into Lowenstein's law office and fired five bullets into him.

Harris, the author of this book, was a close associate of Sweeney's from 1966 to 1968 and, like Sweeney, a contemptuous

adversary of Lowenstein's. For instance, Harris here writes, "In the eyes of Dennis and myself," Lowenstein's connection with the NSA, in the light of the revelations that it had been funded by the CIA, had 'a nefarious cast.'"

Harris, too, had started out as one of Lowenstein's student proteges, but then decided on his own course of civil disobedience against the Vietnam war. Sweeney and Harris were members of the same "Peace and Liberation Commune" at Stanford University. Harris tells us that with Sweeney and two other young men, he founded "The Resistance," the movement which obstructed the draft and encouraged burning draft cards. Together Harris and Sweeney organized chapters of "The Resistance" west of the Rockies, and together with others they turned in draft cards to the federal attorney's office in San Francisco. As Lowenstein went to Congress, Harris went to the penitentiary for his leadership in draft refusal. "While I was locked up," Harris relates, "Dennis oversaw the commune's Resistance responsibilities."

BUT HARRIS had married the gifted, famous, and wealthy Joan Baez, and he heard that on this account Sweeney said he had "sold out." At the height of the



Dennis Sweeney

Vietnam war, Harris informs us, Sweeney went to Czechoslovakia in a delegation to meet with representatives of the National Liberation Front and returned enthusiastic about "the Vietnamese he had met." Sweeney proudly wore a ring that had been given to him by the NLF people, who said it had been made from a piece of the fuselage of a downed U.S. bomber. This was the kind of truck with police states that Lowenstein, who was consistently anti-totalitarian, opposed.

One night, with a couple of commune members and a few people from Berkeley, ("while I was in Alabama," Harris specifies) Sweeney helped slobber gasoline on the naval ROTC clubhouse at Stanford, and they set a match to a fuse and the place went up in "a sheet of flame."

NOW DAVID HARRIS, identifying himself as "a journalist working out of San Francisco . . . with the *New York Times*, gives us a book about Lowenstein, Sweeney, and himself. It's no ordinary book by a journalist, it's a book by an enemy of Lowenstein's.

No friend of Lowenstein's would consistently call him Allard — he was Al to his friends. Bit by bit, in tones of envy, resentment, and sarcasm, Harris tears "Allard" down: He was said to have become a perennial candidate, he was a namedropper, he could not share the stage with anyone, "he dominated conversations, invariably believing he knew best," his belief in himself was "unswerving," he was pushy, he attributed dark motives to his critics, he expected his young proteges to run his errands like lapdogs.

Harris completely avoids discussing the substance of his and Sweeney's grievance with Lowenstein because he kept working for reform (within the system). Who was right, who wrong? Well enough does Harris avoid the question now, for how would he explain his own subsequent attempt to get elected to Congress? (Lowenstein endorsed his opponent, who won.) Tom Hayden, too, has had recourse to electoral politics in California. In the American context, Lowenstein was right, yet there is no fair-minded admission of that here.

Using guilt by association, Harris hints that Lowenstein was in the know about the CIA's noxious funding of NSA, but provides no evidence. In controversy



Al Lowenstein

after controversy, from the Mississippi delegation fight among the Democrats in 1964 through Lowenstein's good works in southern Africa and elsewhere, Harris belittles Lowenstein's motives and roles. The author's purpose is systematically depreciatory.

In contrast, Harris tells us that in college Sweeney was "a gifted student of social thought . . . by all standards, ahead of his time." Sweeney was "the Mississippi hero," "widely respected," "the kind of person you could count on, however tight things got." We can accept Harris' testimony about the idealistic and courageous early Sweeney just as, in fairness, we would accept the testimony of a friend that Lee Harvey Oswald or Sirhan Sirhan had excellent qualities. But no fair-minded person can accept Harris' arguing that Lowenstein's also courageous role in the dangerous work against segregation in Mississippi was self-serving, yet Sweeney's was "extraordinary."

Harris thematically advances his belief that Lowenstein was attracted to men physically, although Harris does not assert that this attraction was expressed in sexual activity. Harris says Lowenstein once hugged up to him in a motel bed and that Sweeney told Harris he had had the same experience with Lowenstein. Harris also tells us that Sweeney falsely told others that Harris and Lowenstein

had sex together. Throughout, Harris insists on his theme that Lowenstein was attracted to men.

OSTENSIBLY this is brought up as relevant to Sweeney's motives in murdering Lowenstein, although Harris makes no case that it was. Harris disingenuously protests that "it is not character assassination to indicate that" Lowenstein was attracted to men "since complex sexuality does not discredit a person." It should not, but like everyone else Harris knows that in the real world it will may, and this theme in *Dreams Die Hard*, whether true or false, is part of his assault on the reputation of the dead Lowenstein.

Harris misleadingly writes that Lowenstein's proteges were young men; in fact they also included many young women, with some of whom he became close. Harris brings forward no male who says he has had sex with Lowenstein. Apart from his own first-person testimony, the man-hugging incidents are attributed to Sweeney and corroborated by "a few," "at least five people," and "half a dozen . . . proteges," none named. Discussion of this topic that followed the publication of Teresa Carpenter's discredited article on Lowenstein is reviewed at length.

I became one of Al's hundreds of friends when, as the student editor at the University of Texas in Austin, I worked with him campaigning to get UT into NSA. He was sweet on the young woman who became my first wife and used to threaten to run off with her. He became godfather to both our children, as he did to many others. If he was gay I never heard of it, but if he was, and if Harris thinks that by saying so he brings him down, Harris has another think coming. Civilized people know better than that, and so does history.

The most irregular thing about Harris' book journalistically, especially in the light of his thesis about Lowenstein's attraction to men, is the anonymity of nearly all the primary sources. Since the Janet Cooke case, journalists and editors have been properly jittery about anonymous sources if they are quoted saying things central to a story or damaging to a person. In the 341 pages of *Dreams Die Hard*, by my reading Harris attributes information to only five

'Dreams' a nightmare

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named primary sources — and that is counting in Lowenstein, Sweeney, and Harris himself. This is highly dubious on its face in a book of journalism.

But that's not a tenth of it. Forty-one times, by my count, Harris presents information critical of Lowenstein from anonymous sources. The ratio of quoted to anonymous primary sources is thus about one to ten (worse, if neutral information is counted).

Harris delivers slam after slam against the dead Lowenstein from "SNCC veterans," "some," "several," "a number of other people," "the former Stanford protege," "one friend," "a journalist," "one participant," "one man," "another old friend," "one of his Ivy League proteges," "two former seminarians," "one long-time friend," "the considerable number of those who ended up to Lowenstein's political left," and so on. We are given much inside dope on the radicals from "Rodney," "J.D.," "Stuart," and the like — with no last names.

Harris is so wrapped up in his enactment of his vendetta, he cannot resist even anonymous digs at his adversary's ex-wife, Jenny. Obviously, he did not interview her (and why not?). Yet first, he quotes an anonymous source calling her "quite confused" when she was first falling in love with Lowenstein. Then, again from an anonymous source, he second-hand quotes an exhausted Jenny allegedly jesting that Al seemed to be running for "some minor deity." Finally, quoting only "several people (Lowenstein) talked to about his divorce from Jenny," Harris says that divorce was "painful, confused, and demoralizing" for Lowenstein. This is contemptible, and even more so because it is done under the cover of journalism.

Harris discusses his marriage to Joan Baez with similar insensitivity for his own ex-wife's feelings. He ladles onto us his self-contempt for letting the loving and wealthy Baez buy him new clothes and otherwise begift him. Though he grudgingly concedes there was love between them, he refers most often to their "infatuation." Since he was going to jail anyway, he tells us, "I felt as if I had little to lose" marrying her, and then, as if to exculpate himself for this, he hints that she wanted him, as well, because "I was something of a hero, too . . . Linked with me she was now the beneficiary of the credibil-

ity generated by the Resistance's willingness to sacrifice for what we believed in." (As if Baez needed credibility!) But at last, he tells us, "I was tired of having to live in the midst of my famous wife's reputation." And whose fault was that — hers? Hardly.

The clue to the real nature of this book is Harris' accounting, in closing, that he interviewed "50 . . . veterans of the '60s," with no names. Apparently he combed through his allies in SNCC and the anti-draft movement and some of Lowenstein's critics. As far as one can tell, he did not interview a cross-section of Lowenstein's thousands of friends and admirers. At my request Lowenstein's sister gave me a list of more than 50 of Lowenstein's best friends — not one is quoted as a primary source in this book.

PERSONALLY HARRIS responded honorably to what he regarded as an unjust war. He refused to go, encouraged others to refuse, knowingly risked very long prison terms, and rejecting Sweeney's advice that he escape before he was imprisoned — he was locked up in federal prison for 20 months. Since Henry David Thoreau, most thoughtful Americans have respected conscientious civil disobedience, especially when the person who commits it willingly accepts the punishment for violating the law. Although Lowenstein was right on basic strategy, Harris pursued an honorable course of resistance.

In his summary remarks Harris tells us that the upheavals of the period left "Allard Lowenstein a legend, Dennis Sweeney a casualty." Lowenstein wasn't a casualty, too? As Harris brutally writes, "He was shot in the gut and his heart had two holes in it." In Harris' early version of this book for the *New York Times Magazine* (which was much more balanced and absent the thesis about sex), Harris wrote of Lowenstein and Sweeney, "Neither man succeeded, and neither man failed." Lowenstein didn't succeed? And Sweeney, the assassin, didn't fail? Odder still, Harris tells us in this book that Lowenstein was on a downward

track, and "Ironically, only what Dennis Sweeney did seemed to stem the deterioration. A dead Lowenstein's contribution . . . transcended his own personal losing streak. The conclusion was appropriate." What do those last four words mean?

One explanation for this miserable book — one must make some kind of guess — is that Harris believes that he should have received the celebration that has gone to Lowenstein. A plain case of envy. A better title might have been, *My Dreams of Glory Die Hard*.

Of course Al Lowenstein had foibles and flaws, but they were the kind of things that make people laugh with affection. He was one of the highest-minded and most dedicated reformers I have ever known. He gave over his life to good causes, and in 1967 and early 1968, singly and almost alone he personally affected the whole national history for the better. As his good friend Eleanor Roosevelt said, "He is a person of unusual ability and complete integrity. I think he will always fight crusades because injustice fills him with a sense of rebellion." To the socialist Michael Harrington, he was "one of the very finest representatives of a special generation"; to the right-winger William F. Buckley Jr., he was "a great national resource of this country." Whether or not David Harris likes it, as Martin Luther King said, Al Lowenstein's idealism and faithfulness "will ensure him an impregnable niche in the annals of contemporary history."

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