

# Lowenstein Personified Best of Liberalism

LOWENSTEIN: Acts of Courage and Belief, edited by Gregory Stone and Douglas Lowenstein; Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, \$18.98.

Reviewed by  
TODD CULBERTSON

In a 1956 address to the National Student Congress, the late Allard K. Lowenstein said:

"We are the privileged and antiseptic generation. We move in the backwater of great events, well clothed, well housed, and well fed. Struggle is not our hallmark and greatness is not our necessity. We are becoming lazy in the victorious sacrifices of our older brothers and on the nonfulfillment of gloomy prophecies.

"Somewhere where we are not, destinies are upended and centuries disturbed, but in our pleasant world opportunity knocks again and again, and it is the merest shadows that somehow the great things are no longer ours to do something about. When immensity spawns futility, the petty and the fleeting become the ultimate, and rest recede into mystery and irrelevancy. We are a people whose national energies and imagination flourish in crisis, and we rejoice now that crises are past and life demands less national virtue than it used to. . . . If destiny wants to rendezvous with this generation, she will first have to find us."

In 1983 similar words likely could be spoken only by a conservative. Yes, history is irony. And ours is the most ironic of ages. Allard Lowenstein's career defined political activism. Few in the public realm have so devoted themselves to principle. That some of the principles Lowenstein espoused caused so much grief for so many millions detracts



Allard Lowenstein

little from his grand accomplishment: the topping of the most mendacious President this century has endured.

In the mid-Sixties Lowenstein led the "Dump Johnson" movement. He galvanized campuses; he recruited volunteers; he invigorated the lazy; he inspired the dull. Gene McCarthy's showing in the primaries may have forced Lyndon Johnson into premature exile, and Richard Nixon's position on Vietnam may have been closer to the American pulse, but at least during 1967 and early 1968, Lowenstein occupied the center stage. Johnson's defeat was his victory.

Although Lowenstein opposed U.S. policy in Vietnam, he did not identify with the radical Left. Indeed, the Left vilified him. Most in mid-America

probably did not know his name, but Tom Hayden and comrades treated Lowenstein with contempt.

In 1968, Hayden said, "I believe in violence. I think this country will change only by violence." In 1969, Lowenstein rebutted: "It is past time that we asked what principle or pragmatism is served by this kind of behavior. Will someone please tell me how it hurts racism in South Africa to assault the president of Cornell? Do we really help end the war by shouting down James Reston and or hurting profanities at Mary Bunting? Are we contributing to the downfall of the military-industrial complex by burrowing down ROTC shacks or pitching deans out of random buildings? Will gutting the First Amendment make it easier to create a republic with liberty and justice for all?" At a time when most wore their opinions like Guccis and faded jeans, Lowenstein held convictions.

He believed in working within the system. He was a Democrat, and a democrat. While many campus crazies contended the Vietnam nightmare flowed inevitably from a corrupt, immoral American society and system, Lowenstein perceived the war as a "mistake." Because the system itself remained essentially good, mistakes were correctable.

The U.S. did not properly prosecute the Vietnam war — successive Presidents tried to buy victory on the cheap. Perhaps the war was, as Norman Podhoretz fears, beyond America's moral capacities. The cause was just, and Lowenstein's position on the war was wrong. Lowenstein possessed far more dignity and honesty than most on the anti-war front, but,

he, too, fell victim to naïveté and illusion. The millions of murdered and imprisoned Southeast Asians and the hundreds of thousands of boat people testify to the blindness of the anti-war cause. Destiny found its generation and the generation fled.

Lowenstein served one term in Congress, and lost several elections. In 1979 he represented the U.S. at the United Nations. At human rights talks in Geneva, he shocked the assembled hypocrites by condemning the USSR. In congressional testimony, he said: "It is certainly impossible to achieve detente if the price of detente is to give the Soviet Union immunity from even talking about questions which are of great concern to a very large number of Americans, and which are legitimately a concern of the international community: under the [UN] charter, the declaration [on human rights], and the Helsinki Final Act." Jeanne Kirkpatrick would agree. Fritz Mondale probably would not.

*Lowenstein: Acts of Courage and Belief* is not a biography. Rather, it offers a collection of speeches by Lowenstein and articles about him. The editors provide generally informative transitions. The reader can skip the tendentious introduction by James Wechsler and move straight to Lowenstein. The 1956 student speech, which resembles the rhetoric of Whittaker Chambers, opens the formal selections. It alone justifies the price of the book.

The late Richard Hofstadter termed the Sixties the "age of rubbish." The stench waits even now. But despite the supreme squallor of his death, Lowenstein shone through the trash. He personified Liberalism at its best and most tragic. Few men have so eloquently defended the rights of the individual; few have so eloquently propagandized policies that caused such pain to individuals.

© Mr. Culbertson is a member of The