



DALLAS, TX.
TIMES-HERALD
D. 250,500 — S. 355,743
DALLAS-Ft. WORTH METROPOLITAN AREA

NOV 28 1983

A liberal's futile legacy from the '60s

"Lowenstein: Acts of Courage and Belief," edited by Gregory Stone and Douglas Lowenstein. 349 pp. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, \$18.95.)

By ROD DAVIS

READING THIS collection of essays and speeches by or about Allard K. Lowenstein, the paradigmatic liberal activist of the 1960s murdered by a former supporter on March 14, 1980, is an unpleasant and disturbing experience; in the account of the convolutions of his times I find old wounds still raw, old lines still drawn, and old conflicts very much unresolved. As one who passed through the decade of Vietnam, civil rights and generational upheaval considerably more radicalized than Lowenstein, I perceive his cold war liberal delusions just as, or perhaps even more, fatuous than I did then; and yet, recalling the monstrous nature of the war machine inflicted so notably on my contemporaries, I confess to a poignant affection for Lowenstein the man, not the theorist, whose chief flaw was the propagation not of evil ideas but false hope. Perhaps that is why Dennis Sweeney, so crazed we will never know his motive, turned against Lowenstein, shooting him not once, but five times, with a .38.



Allard Lowenstein

A former aide to Sen. Hubert Humphrey, the paradigmatic liberal steazoid, Lowenstein had both the talent and energy to create and direct political action. He very early undertook a variety of social causes, from battling against South African racism to organizing civil rights workers in Mississippi, but his major showing before the nation was tied to the anti-war movement. In 1967, Lowenstein masterminded the Dump Johnson campaign, which, failing to hook Sen. Robert Kennedy, founded Sen. Eugene McCarthy as an opponent to LBJ, who by then was pouring a half million U.S. troops into Southeast Asia, with no let-up in sight. It worked: Johnson bowed out of the 1968 campaign, setting up several possibilities for a new president, a new direction, etc., in American life — the hope Lowenstein proffered.

Hope has a way of bowing to reality, and 1968 became the year of the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Kennedy, the corrupt candidacy of Humphrey, and the worst political convention in American history, Chicago, 1968, where the electoral anti-war movement Lowenstein wanted us to believe in (I did, until then) got beaten to death by Richard Daley, may his soul rest in turmoil. Nixon and Kissinger followed, the war continued. Ironically, Lowenstein in 1968 was elected as the representative from New York's 5th Congressional District. Two years later he was gerrymandered out. He spent the rest of his life entwined with Democratic party politics. For a time, he served in the UN under Jimmy Carter's ambassador, Andrew Young, but he was really more equipped to be a gadfly within the establishment than a player. At the time of his death, he had become a frequent lecturer on various world issues, particularly "human rights", practiced law in New York and spent time with his wife, Jenny, and three children.

The selections in this book, some, like that of David Halberstam, quite good, others, like the introduction by James Weschsler, quite bad, convey an accurate impression of the range of debate on social-political change of the times. On the one hand were the hawks, whose ideas were of course those expressed by the existence of the war. Opposition, however, was consistently hegemonized by liberals, such as Lowenstein, and what can be seen throughout the historical pieces in this collection is the shut-out, by journalists and politicians, of the ideas of the most radical anti-war protestors, almost always described as the "far Left," the "fringe", the "violent ultra-left" — i.e., the SDS, the Movement, etc. Allard Lowenstein, like his friend Ronnie Dugger in Texas, was among the harshest critics of the New Left, resorting to red-baiting whenever necessary and useful to support his idea that the system could be reformed; the position of the New Left was that the system was the problem.

Those who lived through the time have deep feelings regarding this critical point, and to some people, Lowenstein remains an example of a liberal who, thinking he could make the system "responsive," in the jargon of the day, actually did nothing more than keep it "respectable," and thus gave aid and comfort to his own enemies, the Rostows, McNamaras, Johnsons, Nixons unto the Reagans and Schultzes and Weinbergers of 1983. The legacy of the turmoil of the '60s anti-war movement, in many ways, is that neither the liberals nor the left prevailed. If you feel that it was people such as good-hearted Lowenstein who, finally, diluted, not invigorated, the mobilization of popular opposition to the war, you may view him in a place of less sanctity than the contributors to this book; which is only to say that the privileging of the liberal point of view as the only acceptable left-of-center opposition in American political culture continues today as it did in 1968. The system remains.

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