A Pied Piper of the '60s

NEVER STOP RUNNING
Allard Lowenstein and the Struggle to Save American Liberalism
By William H. Chafe
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By Alan Ehrenhalt

RARELY IN THE ANNALS of political biography have so many words been devoted to such a skimpy formal résumé.

Allard Lowenstein ran for office half-a-dozen times and managed to win one two-year congressional term. He thrust himself into the civil-rights and anti-war movements but quarreled with his allies and found himself relegated to the sidelines when most of the important events were taking place. He wrote nothing that reached more than a tiny audience. He spent most of his adult life as an aging student activist, darting from one college to another to conduct campus political intrigues that strike us a generation later as much ado about rather little.

And yet résumés can lie. To his friends, his followers, even to the many who wound up angry at him, Al Lowenstein was touched with an indefinable form of greatness. He was a kind of hypnotist. He could be a spellbinding speaker, and he was a magnificent one-on-one salesman. He could look people in the eye, speak to them urgently, and convince them to drop whatever they were doing and set out to change the world. It was one of those disciples, Dennis Sweeney, turned psychotic, who became obsessed with Lowenstein and murdered him in his Manhattan office in 1980.

William Chafe, professor of history at Duke University, is a believer in the man's mysterious greatness. In setting down Lowenstein's life at enormous length, and seeking to connect it to a whole generation of important political events, he has taken on a very difficult task.

When he describes his subject, in the very first sentence, as "one of the pivotal figures who shaped American political culture during the post-World War II era," Chafe provides Lowenstein with an introduction that the ensuing 474 pages never come close to justifying. By the end, Chafe has probably done as much to deflate Lowenstein's reputation as to enhance it. And yet, by devoting much of his attention not to arguments for Lowenstein's importance but to a chronicle of his personal torments and conflicts, it must be said that Chafe has produced an oddly compelling book.

Allard K. Lowenstein grew up in the New York suburbs, the son of an affluent Jewish restaurateur. He rebelled against his ethnic and regional roots by enrolling at the University of North Carolina in 1945, at age 16, and surrounding himself with a coterie of blond-haired gentile men and women who joined him in a series of liberal campus crusades and campaigns for —*Continued on page 10*

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Allard K. Lowenstein in 1974

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student office. Lowenstein liked student politics so much—and was so good at it—that he did not let the inconvenience of graduation stop him from practicing it. He was a charter member of the National Student Association in the late 1940s, president of the organization in the early 1950s, and its ubiquitous elder statesman for a long time after that, flying to the NSA convention each year to wheel and deal for the election of officers he wished to see chosen to perpetuate his legacy.

The NSA in those days was essentially a CIA front, aimed at establishing a counterforce to communist student groups all over the world. In some years, 80 percent of its funding was laundered CIA money. Chafe argues that Lowenstein was not involved in creating the CIA connection but probably knew about it. There is no reason to assume he would have objected; Lowenstein was a passionate liberal but an equally passionate anti-communist, stung by the McCarthyite allegations that brought down his North Carolina mentor, Sen. Frank Graham, and determined that nobody would ever do that to him.

LOWENSTEIN took occasional sabbaticals from student politics to accept grown-up work: a teaching job in the political science department at Chapel Hill, a deanship at Stanford. He never lasted long in these jobs, but it was always long enough to make himself a campus legend. When he ended his periodic flings at academic employment to return to the headier temptations of life on the road, he invariably left behind one more cadre of youthful idealists who had become committed to whatever cause Lowenstein was promoting and who insisted, years later, that meeting him was a decisive moment in their lives.

Lowenstein took two of his proteges to South Africa with him in 1958, departing that country one step ahead of the police. He took dozens of them with him to Mississippi in 1963. How much he accomplished in these or other bursts of protest is a question that Chafe treats with skepticism. In Mississippi, Lowenstein bombarded the local black leadership with so much advice and instruction that they soon began ignoring him. By the summer of 1964, the climactic moment of the "Freedom Summer" voting registration drive, he was long since out of the picture. His legacy was the large cohort of student idealists he had recruited to the movement from Stanford, Chapel Hill, and other campuses he had frequented.

Roughly the same thing can be said for his signature activist accomplishment, the "Dump Johnson" movement that ended in the forced retirement of a sitting U.S. president in 1968. Chafe places a great deal of weight upon this episode as the basis of Lowenstein's historical importance. The "Dump Johnson" crusade, he says, "testified dramatically to the genius and political passion of Allard Lowenstein and represented the apex of his political influence."

But it also advertised all of Lowenstein's temperamental weaknesses: his disorganization, his refusal to surrender center stage, his inability to relate to fellow-crusaders on any terms but the mentor-protege relationship he had established with his student-followers over the past decade. Lowenstein did launch the "Dump Johnson" idea and brought it national media attention; he did lean on Sen. Eugene McCarthy to challenge Johnson's renomination. But he never got along with McCarthy and played almost no role in the campaign. By the time his movement actually reached its moment of success, with Johnson's statement of withdrawal in the spring of 1968, Lowenstein had abandoned McCarthy altogether and was scrambling for a place in the entourage of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy.

By this time also, Lowenstein was embarked on a decade-long series of campaigns for Congress. Chafe is hard on Lowenstein as a candidate, seeing outright perversity in his willingness to throw himself into impossible situations. According to Chafe, Lowenstein turned down the one shot he had at a safe seat—in Brooklyn in 1974.

One could be more charitable here. Lowenstein's upset win in 1968 was a major contribution to the national anti-war movement. His contest for re-election two years later, in a district drawn specifically to defeat him, was a campaign of genuine principle. He was undone by vote fraud in Brooklyn in 1972—reason enough, perhaps, not to want to return there afterward, safe seat or no safe seat.

What makes this a dramatic book is not, however, Chafe's dissection of Lowenstein's activist years or his political campaigns. It is his treatment of Lowenstein's secret: Unknown to most of the people who worked with him, Al Lowenstein was homosexual. His endless visits to college campuses in the 1950s and 1960s were predominantly efforts to recruit political talent, but they were something else as well. They were a search for personal and physical closeness. "Almost always," Chafe writes, "Al gave the 'other' the message that he was a special person—the 'best' student government leader, the funniest storyteller. Then came his invitation to share confidences; a meditation on how rare and important 'best friends' were; the conclusion that a deep and lasting bond had been established; and then, perhaps a physical expression of that intimacy."

In the late 1970s, divorced from his wife and separated most of the time from his three children, Lowenstein took the first tentative steps toward coming out of the closet. He campaigned for a gay-rights plank at the Democratic Party's midterm convention in 1978; in the last few months of his life, he mobilized gay activists to work in Edward M. Kennedy's presidential campaign. Chafe seems to think gay rights would have been the crusade of Lowenstein's middle age. There is no way to know; Lowenstein was 51 when Dennis Sweeney shot him in the spring of 1980.

Chafe spends more of this book ruminating about Lowenstein's sexuality than many readers will find necessary or interesting. On the other hand, this is what ultimately gives the book its coherence. It makes sense of Lowenstein's restless, compulsive, often self-defeating life. It makes the title of the book eerily appropriate. The one thing Lowenstein did all his life was run: from campus to campus, from campaign to campaign, from his own sexual confusion and self-doubt. "If he stayed in one place," Chafe writes in the end, "he would have had to deal with all the issues—including the secrets—from which he was running." ■

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Allard K. Lowenstein campaigning on Long Island's south shore in 1970