

November 7, 1993

One Person Made a Difference

By DAVID OSHINSKY;

NEVER STOP RUNNING Allard Lowenstein and the Struggle to Save American Liberalism. By William H. Chafe. Illustrated. 556 pp. New York: Basic Books. \$28.

IN the chaotic 1960's, against a backdrop of violent protests, racial strife and televised assassinations, a new kind of politics emerged from a rather novel source. It was a politics of impatience and idealism, propelled by elite college students who had come of age in the prosperous baby-boom years following World War II. And it was molded, in large measure, by a ruffled, frenetic tactician named Allard K. Lowenstein, whose radical strategies sometimes masked his thoroughly mainstream political beliefs.

The title of William H. Chafe's book "Never Stop Running" perfectly captures the manic crusading, the rootlessness and the fear of personal relationships that made Lowenstein unique. "How we behave in our public lives inevitably reflects values, attitudes and experiences embedded in our private lives, and vice versa," writes Mr. Chafe, a professor of history at Duke University. In pursuing this vital link between the personal and the political, he has interviewed dozens of people and mined every scrap of paper -- including private correspondence and diaries -- from a subject who seemed to throw nothing away. The result is both a superb biography of Lowenstein and a gripping history of liberal protest and reform in an increasingly conservative age.

Politics came naturally to Lowenstein. His immigrant father preached the virtues of socialism while slicing roast beef at the family's bustling cafeteria in Manhattan. Born in 1929, Allard was, at age 7, handing out campaign leaflets for President Franklin D. Roosevelt; at 9, he was raising money for the anti-Franco forces in the Spanish Civil War. His idea of fun in these years was to chart obscure elections and to argue politics with adults. "In almost all these ventures," Mr. Chafe writes, "Lowenstein defended the underdog, the outcast, the less established cause."

This was hardly surprising. As a child of the Great Depression, Lowenstein admired the New Deal's spirit of liberal reform. And he saw that fundamental change could occur within the political process, even in the most perilous of times. That, Lowenstein believed, was what separated the United States from totalitarian regimes. Americans used the strengths of their system to remedy its faults.

As a brilliant graduate of Horace Mann, an elite private school in New York City, Lowenstein had his pick of colleges. Yet he chose to enter the University of North Carolina in 1945 -- a decision that brought his family to tears. Why would a liberal Jewish New Yorker go to Chapel Hill, a sleepy Christian town known to its residents as "the southern side of heaven"? Lowenstein's explanation was simple: he went there, he said, to fight racial segregation at its source.

There was some truth to this. As a 16-year-old freshman, Lowenstein caught the eye of U.N.C.'s president, Frank Porter Graham, a prominent Southern liberal, who quickly became his role model and his friend. With Graham's quiet encouragement, Lowenstein led a crusade to integrate the university a full decade before civil rights became a consuming national cause. His successes were modest; the roots of Jim Crow ran deep. But even then, a classmate observed, he "was able to move people with a power that is all but earthly."

Lowenstein also went South to escape his ethnic roots. Short and stocky, with thick glasses, thinning hair and a large nose, he felt a powerful sense of inferiority about his looks and his Jewish identity. At Chapel Hill, he sang in a Presbyterian church, dated only Christian women and tried without success to pledge a fraternity that openly excluded Jews. Years later, Lowenstein told a friend that he had chosen North Carolina in order to erase "any aspect of Jewishness that would keep other people from getting close to him." He wanted, more than anything else, to be a "normal American." He eventually married Jennifer Lyman, an upper-class Protestant Bostonian, in 1966.

As Mr. Chafe makes clear, however, Lowenstein was incapable of closeness on any serious level. His ethnic insecurities were compounded by a sexual ambivalence that he never fully resolved. Deeply attracted to young men -- mostly "blond, blue-eyed, 6 foot 3 inch" types, a friend recalled -- Lowenstein spent a lifetime acting on the margin of his desires. He dared not acknowledge his homosexual feelings in an era when same-sex relationships were taboo. "One of the only solutions to this dilemma was to avoid intimacy," Mr. Chafe writes. "It was for that reason that Al had so many acquaintances, and for the most part insisted on being with them in groups."

By the time he left Chapel Hill in 1949, Lowenstein's social patterns were deeply ingrained. As a founder of the National Student Association, a liberal, anti-Communist group that would later be exposed as a recipient of secret financing from the C.I.A., he aggressively courted older public figures like Eleanor Roosevelt, who added luster to his reputation as a man with impeccable connections. (Lowenstein denied any knowledge of the C.I.A. financing, and no hard evidence has been produced to undermine his claim.) At the same time, he became a mentor to dozens of student leaders he met on his cross-country jaunts for the organization. What was missing -- what always seemed to be missing in Lowenstein's life -- were meaningful relationships with men and women his own age, those most likely to demand an intimacy he could not easily provide.

Lowenstein never had a "real" career. His modest needs and substantial inheritance allowed him to operate, in Mr. Chafe's apt description, as an "itinerant director of various crusades for freedom." After earning a law degree at Yale, and receiving a mock award as "the student who graduated . . . having attended the fewest classes," Lowenstein took a series of teaching and administrative jobs at elite universities like Stanford, where he rallied young disciples to his side.

It was Allard Lowenstein, more than anyone else, who awakened white college students to the evils of South African apartheid and recruited hundreds of them for the civil rights struggle in Mississippi in the early 1960's. And it was Lowenstein who later channeled their seething antiwar sentiments into a political movement that unseated a President. But it was also Lowenstein who grabbed full credit for everything he touched, regardless of the contributions of others. "He was sort of what Alice Roosevelt Longworth said about her father, Teddy," a friend of Lowenstein's recalled. "He wanted to be the bride at every wedding, and the corpse at every funeral."

During the Mississippi campaign, he seemed to be everywhere at once, rushing madly from a voter registration drive in Jackson, Miss., to a liberal fund-raiser on Central Park West. Arrested late one night in the Mississippi Delta -- a civil rights worker's worst nightmare -- Lowenstein identified

himself as a lawyer, demanded a telephone and loudly placed a collect call to Franklin D. Roosevelt 3d, spelling out the name letter by letter. "Although Roosevelt was barely awake," Mr. Chafe notes, "Lowenstein acted as though he were intensely engaged, telling him, 'No, don't call President Kennedy tonight, wait until tomorrow.'" The police quickly let him go.

Lowenstein's recruits did not fare nearly as well. Their own lives of privilege and security had not prepared them for the overwhelming violence and poverty of everyday black life in Mississippi. Some were traumatized by the experience; others were radicalized. And many grew tired of Lowenstein's claim to leadership, his love of the spotlight and, above all, his philosophy of working within a political system that seemed hopelessly repressive and corrupt.

Lowenstein felt betrayed by his young recruits. He lashed back, charging that the civil rights movement had been captured by left-wing radicals who preached violence and revolutionary change. There was an element of truth to these allegations, though the larger issue seemed to be Lowenstein's loss of stature and control. His relationship with students had always been a one-way street. He expected them to serve, not to question; to follow, not to doubt. When that relationship eroded, he sadly walked away.

But not for long. If the lessons of Mississippi were lost on Lowenstein, his thirst for mainstream politics remained very much alive. A new protest was stirring in the mid-1960's against American military involvement in Vietnam. As it engulfed one college campus after another, Lowenstein answered the call. His goal, as always, was to make liberal democracy work by directing the enormous energy and idealism of the young within the political system. And his plan was to "dump" President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968 by mobilizing college students to campaign against his re-election in key primary states. "No one wants him out there," Lowenstein claimed, "and all that we have to do is have someone say it. Like, 'the emperor has no clothes.'" "

THE problem, as Mr. Chafe makes clear, is that the someone who said it first, Senator Eugene J. McCarthy of Minnesota, did not seem up to the job. Lowenstein came to view Mr. McCarthy as lazy, erratic and uninspiring. He supported him only because his personal choice, Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York, a man he truly admired, wavered for months before entering the Presidential race. In the meantime, Lowenstein returned to his old haunts -- the college campuses -- to recruit an army of well-scrubbed volunteers ("be clean for Gene") for Mr. McCarthy's New Hampshire primary campaign. "We were there because Al had brought us there," a student recalled. "He had asked an awful lot of kids to . . . abandon the craziness and fringe stuff and jump into electoral politics."

Mr. McCarthy's strong showing against long odds in New Hampshire led to the President's retirement. Mr. Chafe is largely correct in describing Lowenstein as the "genius" behind "one of the most remarkable political achievements of contemporary American history." But Lowenstein soiled that achievement, in the eyes of many antiwar Democrats, by continuing to support Gene McCarthy in public while working behind the scenes to secure the Presidential nomination for Bobby Kennedy, a more electable candidate. Even worse, perhaps, was the "almost ghoulish" attempt by Lowenstein to draft Senator Edward M. Kennedy for President following Robert Kennedy's assassination in June 1968. ("Uh, uh," fumed the civil rights leader Charles Evers, "you're not going to do it to that family a third time.") Once again, Mr. Chafe maintains, a Lowenstein crusade had combined "principled advocacy" with "manipulation."

Lowenstein eventually endorsed the Democratic nominee, Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, despite an earlier vow to oppose Humphrey at all costs. As a political pragmatist, Lowenstein

clearly viewed the Vice President as the lesser of two evils in a campaign where the Republican candidate was Richard Nixon. And more important, he needed the support of a united Democratic Party in his own bid for a Congressional seat in a largely Republican district on Long Island. When Lowenstein won that race, he became an elected public official for the first and only time in his life.

It proved a difficult fit. The House of Representatives has its own folkways based on courtesy, compromise, deference and team play. These were not the strong suits of a brash, fast-talking individualist like Lowenstein, who thrived on quick action and the glow of center stage. As hard as he tried, the new Congressman had trouble focusing on the immediate needs of his district. What mattered more to humanity, the jet noise at Kennedy International Airport or the famine in Biafra? Why waste time on the garbage problem in Great Neck when the war was still raging in Vietnam?

Lowenstein was defeated for re-election after one term, partly because the Republican-controlled New York State Legislature had gerrymandered his district away from him. He responded, almost reflexively, by promising another crusade to register the millions of young people recently enfranchised under the 26th Amendment, which lowered the voting age to 18. If properly mobilized, said Lowenstein, their ballots could forge a progressive landslide that would end the Vietnam War, bring social justice to minorities and force Richard Nixon from the White House in 1972.

The crusade flopped. As he traveled about the country, Lowenstein discovered a painful truth: most young people did not resemble the well-bred, idealistic students he had sent to do battle in Mississippi and New Hampshire. They had little interest in politics, even less in a decidedly liberal agenda. What concerned them was the deteriorating economy, the explosion of violent crime and the "unfairness" of affirmative action programs designed to aid minorities. As a result, the young people who registered to vote were more likely to cast a ballot for Richard Nixon than for his liberal opponent. Dumping this President would require far more than Allard Lowenstein could ever deliver, as the 1972 Nixon landslide victory over George McGovern made embarrassingly clear.

The 1970's were a nightmare for him. His repeated campaigns for Congress -- five successive defeats in three different districts -- made him look like Harold Stassen in liberal garb. His wife left him in 1976, unable to take the endless political grind. Worst of all, perhaps, was the demise of Lowenstein's once optimistic vision of the United States, a vision now clouded by notions of conspiracy and foul play.

Convinced that the truth behind Robert Kennedy's assassination had been covered up by sinister forces, he linked that killing, in his less lucid moments, to a larger plot involving the murders of John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. And the more he brooded over his own election defeats, the more he began to see himself as a victim of the same conspiracy to rob the country of its liberal dreams. It became an obsession with Lowenstein, a friend recalled, and "people who had known him for a long period of time sort of shook their heads."

By 1980, Lowenstein seemed as marginal as the liberalism he had so passionately espoused. He drifted from one job to another, working at the United Nations, at a law firm in Manhattan and as a consultant to the moribund Presidential campaign of Edward Kennedy. Though Mr. Chafe says that Lowenstein finally had begun to face his personal demons -- "he may have been almost ready to stop running" -- the evidence is very thin. Indeed, Lowenstein's recurring fear at this time was of a violent death at the hands of an assassin. He even began to write out detailed instructions for his funeral.

As fate would have it, Lowenstein's last act on earth was a charitable one, an attempt to help a troubled former disciple named Dennis Sweeney, who in 1963 had left Stanford at Lowenstein's urging to join the civil rights struggle in Mississippi. Like so many northern students, Mr. Sweeney had been badly scarred by the experience. He returned home in a state of depressed exhaustion, completely burned out.

"According to psychiatrists," Mr. Chafe writes, "Sweeney was the victim of adult-onset schizophrenia, a disease that strikes an individual entering his 20's." He attached himself to political fringe groups, plunged deeply into the drug culture and began hearing strange sounds and voices deep inside his head. Convinced that a C.I.A. dentist had planted transmitters in his mouth, Mr. Sweeney filed down his crowns and fillings to nubs. When the voices continued, he blamed Lowenstein and begged him to stop.

On a bleak March afternoon in 1980, Dennis Sweeney came to Lowenstein's law office in New York. Old movement people had already abandoned this frightening man, but Lowenstein refused to turn him away. He felt compassion for Mr. Sweeney -- and perhaps some responsibility for his awful plight. Their meeting lasted less than two minutes. Then Mr. Sweeney pulled out a gun and fired seven shots at the person whose voice kept echoing in his head. Allard Lowenstein died later that day, at the age of 51. "He was killed," wrote his good friend and political opposite William F. Buckley Jr., "by one of his children."

But the Lowenstein brood is very large. In Congress today, the list of his disciples includes Senators Tom Harkin of Iowa, Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, Paul Wellstone of Minnesota, Joe Lieberman of Connecticut and Bill Bradley of New Jersey, and Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts, to name a few. All of them are helping to forge a new liberal agenda, and their debt to Allard Lowenstein is truly immense. At his best, he taught them that injustice must be confronted, that one person can make a difference, that meaningful reform demands serious sacrifice and that the political process really does work.

"As you go along," Lowenstein said in 1966, "you build a life . . . in which you do many different kinds of things. But it all has a common denominator that gives it some sense, some direction -- the sense that your total activity is going to make a better situation for people to live in. . . . The question should be, is it worth trying to do, not can it be done? . . . You don't just set goals and when you reach them, find that they equal happiness. . . . Within the quest itself, much of the fullness of life exists."

David Oshinsky, a professor of 20th-century history at Rutgers University, is the author of "A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy" and a forthcoming book on race and punishment in the South.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)