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Al Lowenstein's Tangled Legacy

A New Book's Controversial Assertions Provoke Anger and a Spirited Defense

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Five years ago this month a lifetime of political activism ended when Allard K. Lowenstein was murdered by a deranged former protégé. Dennis Sweeney, one of thousands of followers Lowenstein had collected in his years as civil rights and antiwar activist, walked into Lowenstein's office and fired seven bullets, five of which entered Lowenstein's body. More than 3,000 attended Lowenstein's funeral and heard praise for Lowenstein from such disparate voices as William F. Buckley Jr. and Sen. Edward Kennedy. Said Kennedy, "He was our brother."

Now comes "The Pied Piper: Allard Lowenstein and the Liberal Dream," published today by Grove Press, a book that has enraged Lowenstein's friends, family and many of the prominent figures who are named in the book.

The biography, by Richard Cummings, a 47-year-old lawyer and sometime academic, breathlessly claims to contain the "stunning truth" about Lowenstein—"he worked for the CIA in Africa and Spain and informed on suspected Communists in the civil rights movement in Mississippi." The claim, though, is made on the basis of cryptic diary notes, unnamed "intelligence sources" and speculation presented as fact.

"The Pied Piper" is, at the least, another publishing controversy in a period that has seen a biography of heiress Barbara Hutton recalled, a biography of Francis Cardinal Spellman changed in galleys to remove references to alleged homosexuality and a book on moral philosophy canceled because its author supplied a bogus letter of endorsement. But to many friends and associates of Lowenstein, "The Pied Piper" is above all an assault on truth and a dead man's reputation.

Outrage over the book and its thesis has poured forth in sworn affidavits, compiled in a remarkable document as large as a telephone book, denouncing the book as "hopelessly inaccurate," replete with falsehoods, innuendo and "baseless charges" about a man who cannot defend himself. No attempts have been made to enjoin the book. Ron Tabak, the lawyer who prepared the affidavits, says it would be a betrayal of Lowenstein's respect for the First Amendment to attempt to censor any book.

However, the complainants are "considering litigation to bring out all the critical evidence." They charge that any damage to Lowenstein's reputation may disillusion those who followed him and hurt the fund-raising activities of the Allard K. Lowenstein Fund, which carries on his work. They also recognize a hapless dilemma; their campaign to "bring out the truth" may "create additional publicity" for a book they despise.

Lowenstein, a one-term congressman, became best known for his leadership of the "Dump Johnson" movement during the Vietnam era. In a time when rage and rhetoric were in fashion, Lowenstein was revered for his intellectual honesty, for his passionate commitment to a civil and human rights activism that stretched from the University of North Carolina to the United Nations. He counted among his friends and acquaintances many of the leading political figures of the postwar generation, liberal and conservative.

Cummings is adamant about his conclusions. The CIA charge? They come from "anonymous sources"; in an interview, Cummings says he can reveal nothing about them. Informing during the civil rights movement? Cummings interprets a single Lowenstein diary entry but cannot say what names were revealed to whom.

Indeed, one searches in vain for documents or even supporting corroboration for the allegations Cummings makes. His book frequently leaps to assertions of fact on the basis of Lowenstein's associations with people, such as the Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr., who in fact did work for the CIA. Often, when Cummings is unable to explain how Lowenstein was supporting himself, he concludes that the CIA was in the woodpile.

Cummings, a Princeton graduate with environmentalist interests, says he set out to write a favorable book on Lowenstein immediately after his death. He had a first draft written, he says, when his unnamed sources heard about the project and came up with the CIA connection. Cummings said it was back to the drawing board—for more writing and research. As a liberal, he was *"stricken"* with what he found, says Cummings, a curly-haired man who speaks in italics.

"This guy Cummings is really a garbage man, and that's my quote," says Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.), one of those named in the book. "He has learned that dead men bring no defamation suits."

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