A Friendship That Ended in Tragedy

Lowenstein

DREAMS DIE HARD
By David Harris
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BY CLAYBORNE CARSON

It came to an end on March 14, 1963, when Dennis Sweeney, former Stanford student activist, allegedly shot and killed former Congresswoman Allard Lowenstein (Dem., New York), who had once been his friend and political mentor.

It had started in 1961, when Lowenstein, an assistant dean at Stanford, brought his vision of a better world to Sweeney, a freshman from Oregon.

I interviewed Lowenstein in 1977 on the deterioration after 1963 of the relations between himself and young civil rights activists, especially those associated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). One of his “most bitter experiences,” he said, had occurred after he had recruited Sweeney to work in the McComb, Mississippi, voting rights campaign, where civil rights workers became the target of numerous racist bombings. Lowenstein explained how the constant fear felt by the workers “produced genuine paranoia and very often deeply bitter and permanently damaged people.” He believed the fear, as well as political infighting in SNCC, contributed to Sweeney’s subsequent madness, which culminated when Sweeney “backed out the fillings of his teeth because he said the CIA were using those fillings to damage his brain.

Lowenstein then tried to explain why he had become the focus of Sweeney’s insane fears. “He went to Mississippi during the period when SNCC was getting into ‘black power’ and, during the period when I was becoming the sort of villain in their eyes, (he) became very much the spearhead of their campaign against me in a lot of ways. We met under very ugly kinds of circumstances in places where he would attack me from a very personal feeling... He, after becoming very much involved with SNCC, ended up being thrown out of SNCC himself... They ended up accusing him of all the things that he had accused me of except it was done after he had put all of his emotion into SNCC, and it very, very badly damaged him.”

David Harris’ thoroughly researched memoir-biography makes clear how Lowenstein saw himself as both part of the fabric of the youthful idealism of the 1960s and as a detached critic of the distinctive ideological threads that emerged from the decade of activism. SNCC workers, including Sweeney, turned against Lowenstein because they accurately saw him as a threat to their notion of participatory democracy, as an opponent of the idea that the civil rights struggle should be controlled by local black leaders in the South rather than “establishment liberals” and national black spokesmen. SNCC did encourage white staff members to organize in white rather than black communities, but Sweeney’s voluntary departure from the South in 1960 came more than a year before SNCC expelled all whites in the organization.

Harris displays some of the skills of a historian by merging documentary evidence with personal memories to recreate the complex tapestry of civil and anti-war activism in which Lowenstein and Sweeney were entwined. He also displays his talents as a novelist by exploring the subly intertwined personal relationships that are often ignored in political history and even censored from personal recollections.

Harris reports that even before their political paths diverged, Sweeney told friends that he had rejected a sexual advance from his mentor. Harris speculates that this seemed likely “to have torn Sweeney between his admiration for Lowenstein as role model on the one hand and the specter of imagined incest with his father figure on the other.” Although Harris invited criticism by mentioning this incident, it is the kind of detail that might help us understand how the idealistic community called the Movement unravelled, leaving isolated strands that show few signs of ever coming together again.

If Harris is to be faulted, it is for failing to probe more deeply into the connections between the personal and political lives of his subjects. Perhaps he was restrained by fear of legal action, but even his account of his own life has little of the texture of strong emotions or, surprisingly, considering his leadership role in the anti-draft movement, of coherent political beliefs.

“Dreams Die Hard” makes us more aware of the varied tones that were mixed with the bold, bright colors of early 60s idealism. If Harris reminds us of the way in which the colors did not remain as radiant as we had hoped, he also reminds us how sharply those tones contrast with the more pallid recent past.

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