

*David A. Strauss*†

I first heard of Abner Mikva when I was a college student on the East Coast. I had no connection to Chicago, but there were national news stories about a Democratic member of Congress from a mostly Republican suburban Chicago district who repeatedly won reelection by comically narrow margins—and, instead of playing it safe, used his time in Congress to push for gun control, thereby antagonizing the National Rifle Association, a famously powerful lobbying group. I later found out that that was part of a pattern with Ab. He entered politics as a reformer who took on the Richard J. Daley machine. He was first elected to Congress from a Chicago district; as if gun control weren't controversial enough, he opposed the Vietnam War and supported reproductive rights. Mayor Daley saw to it that the boundaries of the district were redrawn to leave Ab without a constituency, so he moved to the North Shore suburbs and won a seat in Congress from there.

He left Congress when President Jimmy Carter appointed him to the DC Circuit. There, among other things, he wrote an opinion upholding the right of a gay soldier to serve in the armed forces. That decision was overturned by the en banc court; Ab had to wait a couple of decades for history to vindicate him. President Bill Clinton made Ab his White House counsel. When he left that position, he and Zoe Mikva started the Mikva Challenge. He taught at Northwestern and at our law school. He had the career that an idealistic law student might dream of having.

To be idealistic in words and actions is one thing; to be a good person is, sometimes, another. There are those liberal visionaries who, as the saying has it, love humankind but hate people. Ab was a liberal visionary who was great with people. He was an energetic, gregarious, buoyant presence around our law school. He got to know people; he came to lunch; he went to workshops and lectures; he engaged people about the work they were doing. He was always friendly, always upbeat, always ready either to have a conversation about something important or just to make small talk. And, needless to say, if you were around Ab and wanted to

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learn things you'd otherwise never know about politics and politicians, you had definitely found the right guy.

"This blessed place," he once called the Law School, in a speech at an alumni event. That is, let's face it, a pretty over-the-top description. It's also a description that was sure to be a crowd-pleaser at an alumni event. But, coming from Ab, it was not forced or contrived. It just reflected his characteristic enthusiasm and his cheerful way of connecting with people. While Ab was on the Law School faculty, if someone who he thought was deserving was in line for a job or an honor, Ab would not just make the phone call; he'd offer to organize a campaign. If you were discouraged about the way things were going in the country, he talked about the bright side and bucked you up.

When our then-colleague and Ab's protégé Barack Obama took his first step into national politics by running in the Democratic Party primary for the House of Representatives, Ab immediately wanted to help organize an event at the Law School. State Senator Obama lost badly in the primary, but it was the last election he ever lost. Many years, and a political era, later, in April 2016, when President Obama visited the Law School near the end of his second term, I was near Ab in the line to get photographs taken with the president. It would have been completely understandable if a ninety-year-old former politician began to reminisce about presidents he had known, or about his role in fostering Obama's historic presidency. Ab wasn't about to do any of that. He wanted to talk about how the president's approval rating in the polls had recently gone up.

It's easy, and a cliché, to be cynical about politicians, and no doubt many of them deserve it. But I don't see how you could know about what Ab did in his public career—and know how he was in the rest of his life—and stay cynical. The clients and constituents he represented; the people who benefited from the causes he fought for; the young people whose lives have been changed by the Mikva Challenge; and those of us who were his colleagues for a time—we all are very lucky to have crossed paths with this remarkable person.