

## Party of One

The unorthodox libertarianism of Nat Hentoff

**Jordan Michael Smith**

“Out of Step,” the working title of a new documentary about Nat Hentoff’s life, strikes the 84-year-old journalist as a good characterization of his idiosyncratic political views. Of course, Hentoff is not the only writer to consider himself alienated. Many contemporary intellectuals have felt lost, no matter how recognized they are. Edward Said’s autobiography was called *Out of Place*. Richard Pipes’s was subtitled *Memoir of a Non-Belonger*. Jonathan Safran Foer’s essay collection: *How to Be Alone*.

For most thinkers, however, isolation is a matter of perception. They feel out of step but have legions of disciples. Not Nat Hentoff. He is part of no movement, an adherent to no ideology. He may be the only Jewish atheist pro-life libertarian hawk in America. And in a partisan, power-infatuated media age, the brand of independent journalism he’s been practicing since the 1940s is disappearing.

Hentoff’s contrarian sensibility descends from the Depression-era Boston in which he grew up. In his first autobiography, *Boston Boy*, he tells of eating a salami sandwich just to spite his Orthodox neighbors. On another occasion, the precocious Hentoff organized a union among the boys at the local candy store. These rabble-rousing instincts are still detectable in his writing, which is marked, above all, by a defense of the individual’s refusal to be silenced. Nat Hentoff just will not shut up.

His passion for free speech dates back nearly 70 years. He was the editor-in-chief of his college paper, the defunct *Northeastern News*. “It was the only school I could get into,” he says of Northeastern University, which awarded Hentoff an honorary doctorate of laws in 1985. Considering the controversy he caused as a student, the school’s decision to honor him was something of an admission of defeat.

The young Hentoff, instead of reporting on the state of cafeteria food or the condition of the libraries, launched an investigation into anti-Semitic elements of the city council, which provided substantial funding to Northeastern. He was summarily fired by the university’s president. “I began to get interested in the First Amendment, and how people’s lives and jobs were jeopardized when they expressed their ideas,” he says.

In 1958, Hentoff was hired by New York’s *Village Voice* and remained there until December 2008, when he was laid off. In his half-century at the underground paper he became an institution—a *New York Times* article announcing his departure was headlined, “Village Voice Lays Off Nat Hentoff and 2 Others.”

He was equally influential in his 15-year *Washington Post* column, “Sweet Land of Liberty,” which ceased in 2000, and in his weekly United Media column, which still reaches 250 newspapers. He’s probably the only man to have written for both the *Washington Times* and *The Progressive*.

He further has had an esteemed music-journalism career: associate editor at *Down Beat Magazine*, co-founder of the defunct *Jazz Review*, contributor to *JazzTimes*. He wrote liner notes for albums by Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, and Bob Dylan, and in 2004 was named a Jazz Master by the National Endowment for the Arts—the first non-musician to win that honor.

But Hentoff will primarily be remembered for his unceasing defense of civil liberties. The nation’s foremost polemical authority on the First Amendment, he has won the American Bar Association’s Silver Gavel Award and the National Press Foundation’s lifetime award for distinguished contributions to journalism. The *Times* article eulogizing Hentoff’s *Village Voice* career noted, “Few have more assiduously and consistently defended the right of people to express their views, no matter how objectionable.” The Cato Institute felt the same way and hired him as a senior fellow.

Hentoff's position on free speech is unique in its absolutism. "It is unconditional and equally applied," says Glenn Greenwald, a constitutional law and civil-rights litigator who writes for *Salon*. Most Americans, if they come through the U.S. educational system, have a basic intellectual understanding of the importance of free speech, Greenwald says, "But people have a natural instinct to believe the First Amendment should be curbed when there is something said they are offended by." Greenwald, who has written extensively about the pusillanimity of the Washington press corps, says this censorship urge is no less powerful among journalists than the rest of the population. He calls Hentoff "notably courageous."

Though he is now connected with the libertarian Cato Institute, Hentoff was long associated with the New Left, largely because of his focus on personal liberties. He co-authored a book on state secrets in 1974 and co-filed a suit in Federal District Court that sought to void an agreement to give President Nixon ownership of White House tapes and documents. He was friends with counterculture comedians George Carlin, Richard Pryor, and Lenny Bruce, whom he calls "considerably knowledgeable about the First Amendment." He also kept company with Eldridge Cleaver and Malcolm X. He describes the latter as "very thoughtful" and insists that he was moving toward a mainstream integrationist position at the time of his assassination. But Hentoff was no Tom Hayden radical. True, he believes in a strong social safety net, but his love of basic American liberties gave him an instinctive distrust of excessive state power, much less sympathy for North Vietnam or Cuba. While friendly with black radicals, he was never like-minded. "I thought the civil-rights movement's descent into violence was incredibly stupid. It was criminal," he says.

Hentoff's commitment to freedom has taken him places unfamiliar to a leftist. In the 1980s, he resigned from the ACLU over its support of assisted suicide. He rejoined after 9/11, saying the organization's commitment to the Constitution outweighed its deficiencies on other issues. That doesn't mean he's muted his criticisms, however. His broadsides have a tone of betrayal, as if he's been wounded by a family member. In May, he wrote, "What also appalls me ... is that for years, and now, the American Civil Liberties Union approves 'hate crimes' prosecutions! ... I have long depended on the ACLU's staff of constitutional warriors to act persistently against government abuses of our founding document. Is there no non-politically correct ACLU lawyer or other staff worker or anyone in the ACLU affiliates around the country or any dues-paying member outraged enough to demand of the ACLU's ruling circle to at last disavow this corruption of the Constitution?"

Perhaps the foremost test of Hentoff's commitment to the First Amendment arrived on 9/11. As fear enveloped the country, he was one of the few mainstream voices to forecast an impending narrowing of freedom. In his first column after the attacks, written from New York, he warned, "Unless a band of true constitutionalists can beat back a fear-driven, popular war on free speech, free press, privacy, and due process, under the banner of national security, much of America will ignore the warning of Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy: 'The Constitution needs renewal and understanding each generation, or it's not going to last.'" Hentoff was equally worried about minority rights, extending a concern he has demonstrated since he befriended African-American jazz giants as a child: "Already, Arab Americans among us are being demonized and reviled—not by the government but by fellow citizens on the streets of New York. Their liberty has become fragile."

Week after week, while most columnists focused their energies on deciding which country the U.S. should next invade, Hentoff played his lone note. A December 2001 article was titled "Terrorizing the Bill of Rights." While President Bush boasted an approval rating over 90 percent, Hentoff called him "dangerously ignorant of the Constitution," writing, "This administration violates the Bill of Rights so frequently that there has been little time to organize a national campaign to restore the Constitution."

But whatever charges he leveled at President Bush, Hentoff is no partisan. "President Obama is a complete phony," he says. "I still think Bush was a decent person. He didn't know much about anything, he certainly didn't understand what was going on around him, but he was not a bad person. Obama is not a decent person. He only cares about the power of Barack Obama." Hentoff keeps a file on the president's flip-flops and says

it is getting thicker every day: “He’s reneged on nearly every pledge, from the invocation of state secrets to renditions.”

Unlike most other constitutionalists, however, Hentoff is strongly interventionist. He has been clamoring for war against Sudan for years, melodramatically calling Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir “Africa’s Hitler.” He wrote in September 2001 that the U.S. should “effectively wage war against this cradle of terrorism.” He says, “The UN is totally useless, so what alternative is there? If a coalition of the willing doesn’t go in, then nothing happens. We have at least to establish a no-fly zone. We can’t just keep saying ‘never again,’ we have to do something.” Furthermore, he supported the war in Iraq for humanitarian reasons. He evinces no regret for that position, even though hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died. He has a visceral opposition to tyranny in all its forms, in the U.S. and in the world at large, and believes it must be resisted wherever it exists.

Hentoff doesn’t overlook the connections between war and infringements on liberty. He has written eloquently about the Constitution’s sanctity in times of war, and the United States’ own history of overriding basic rights in times of great stress. Yet he still seems to think a state of permanent war can coexist with freedom. “War does curtail freedom—unless people are aware of what is going on. If there is a clear realization about the basic idea of America amongst people, war does not have to lead to people relinquishing their rights,” he protests.

Hentoff’s belief in Americans’ ability to resist the temptations of empire derives from a faith in the power of education. But he is dismayed at the ignorance about the Constitution among the American populace. “What makes America different than the rest of the world is the U.S. Constitution. It seems to me that most Americans don’t really know why they’re American, or what that means,” he says. His 1983 work of fiction, *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book*, tells the story of a high-school newspaper editor who rebels against school authorities banning *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It is not difficult to imagine who acted as the real-life inspiration for the brave young editor. “The republic is in danger of being lost if it is not understood. People need to know about their freedoms,” he says.

Fifty-odd years is a long time to be infatuated with one idea. Hentoff is rare among American writers for his consistency, but there is one less defining issue on which he has noticeably switched sides. “The only thing I really regret is that I didn’t become pro-life sooner,” he says. “It took me a while to realize that sanctioning abortion meant killing actual human beings.” Hentoff has long championed the rights of the disabled and sees his crusade against abortion as a logical extension of those concerns.

He maintains a hostility to religion, even as he aligns himself with the pro-life cause. “My reading of biology shows that this is clearly the destruction of human life,” he says. “It has its own DNA.” Hentoff’s concern for life extends to the death penalty, which he opposes. He also opposes contraception, saying it “leads to abortion.” This iconoclasm merits a grudging respect even from his intellectual opponents. “Whether or not one agrees with him on abortion, he’s doing it in a principled way,” Greenwald says. “He doesn’t care which side he’s supposed to take, or who he alienates in expressing his beliefs on abortion. He does it anyway.”

Indeed, there is something anachronistic about Hentoff. From his famous love of jazz to his anti-totalitarianism, he seems stuck in the tough interwar Boston of his boyhood. He does not have an e-mail address, uses a typewriter, and his voicemail message twice bellows at callers to leave their phone numbers clearly. He is a lonely scribbler, fanning through clippings instead of attending press conferences. “Nat is a Jeremiah, the biblical figure,” says *Village Voice* senior editor Ward Harkavy. “He sounds alarms. There’s not too many of those left in the industry. There is no I.F. Stone anymore.”

The comparison is apt—Stone was one of Hentoff’s mentors. He learned from Stone the importance of maintaining distance from power, of remaining an individual among the herd that is the Washington press corps. Like Stone, Hentoff was one of the most independent American journalists of the 20th century. If he

doesn't fit into the 21st, the problem might not be with him, but with the century. ■

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