



Nat Hentoff (1925-2017): An eloquent voice for freedom gone

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Nat Hentoff's death at the age of 91 takes from us an eloquent voice for American freedom, as well as a noted jazz critic. He described himself as a "troublemaker" and refused to follow any party line, whether of left or right. His embrace of free speech took him on an interesting journey, from opposing McCarthyism on the right to the contemporary movement of "political correctness" on the left.

Many years ago, this writer participated in a debate with Nat Hentoff at a theater in Greenwich Village in New York City. The subject of the debate was whether or not the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security, of which I had been a staff member, should be reconstituted.

There were two speakers on each side. With me, supporting the reconstitution of the Senate committee, was Midge Decter, an editor of *Commentary*. On the other side were Hentoff and the playwright Arthur Miller. We had a very pleasant dinner before the debate. In those days, people on opposite sides of a public issue, did not feel like "enemies," as so many seem to at the present time, an important part of the decline of our political life.

Hentoff wrote for the *Village Voice* for 50 years and contributed to *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, *Down Beat* magazine and many other publications. He wrote more than 35 books—novels, volumes for young adults and works on civil liberties, education and many other subjects. Starting out as a political activist, joining peace groups and marches for racial equality, he became a friend of Malcolm X. His libertarian instincts slowly came into conflict with those on the left. He criticized feminist, gay and black groups which he charged with trying to censor opponents. He opposed the death penalty and also was a vigorous opponent of abortion, which he viewed as an assault on innocent human life. This enraged his liberal friends.

In "The Pleasures of Being Out Of Step," a 2013 documentary on his life, he said, "The Constitution and jazz are my main reasons for being." By the Constitution, he mainly meant the First Amendment and free speech. He refused to sacrifice what he believed was right to any party line. He became a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute and criticized what he saw as intrusions on individual freedom, such as the Patriot Act. He criticized both Presidents George

W. Bush and Barack Obama for what he viewed as intrusions upon individual rights in the name of national security.

Nat Hentoff defended the right of people to say and write whatever they wanted, no matter who might be offended. In 1992, he hosted Pennsylvania Governor Bob Casey, a pro-life Democrat, who had been denied a spot at his party's presidential convention earlier that summer, for a speech in New York City. The topic: Can a liberal be pro-life? In the audience were many liberal activists. Here is how Hentoff described what ensued in his syndicated column:

“As moderator, I started what would have been the discussion by pointing out that this was an evening about free speech—not only that of the governor of Pennsylvania but also that of anyone in the audience who wanted to challenge him. The hooting, screaming, pounding and whistle-blowing began. Strategically located at both sides of the hall—disruption by stereo—a preening array of hooligans made all speech except their own inaudible. They reminded me of the domestic brown shirts breaking up Jewish meetings in my youth, but these were howling soldiers of the left. (There is no difference, of course, between right and left when it comes to silencing the bearers of uncomfortable ideas).”

Among the opponents of any free exchange of ideas were ACT UP and various pro-choice groups, among them WHAM (Women Health Action Mobilization) and New York University Students for Pro-Choice. Hentoff wrote that, “At least 80 percent of the audience wanted to hear Casey and said so as best they could by applauding his attempts to get started.

But they were no match for the speech muggers. After several tries, Gov. Casey yielded. *‘The Democratic Convention suspended the First Amendment,’ he tried to say. ‘And tonight you tried to do the same thing.’ Casey walked off the stage as the shouters congratulated each other.*”

At one time, Nat Hentoff was a strong supporter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). But he became a vocal critic of the organization for its advocacy of government-enforced university and workplace speech codes. He served on the board of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). His book “Free Speech For Me—But Not For Thee” outlines his views on free speech and criticizes those who he feels favor censorship in any form. He recognized the danger of “political correctness” on our university campuses many years ago. In a 1985 column, he sharply criticized opposition that led to the withdrawal of the proposed commencement speaker at Cornell’s medical school, Prof Noam Chomsky of M.I.T. Chomsky was silenced because of his criticism of Israel and he was replaced by Cornell’s president.

Hentoff, generally a supporter of Israel, wrote, with irony, that the graduates who had opposed Chomsky could rejoice in “having been rescued from the possibly infectious presence of a heretic.”

From his youngest days, Nat Hentoff thought for himself. He was born in Boston. His parents were Jewish immigrants from Russia and on Yom Kippur in 1937, the Jewish day of fasting and

atonement, the 12-year-old Nat sat on his porch on a street leading to a synagogue and slowly ate a salami sandwich. The sandwich made him sick and the action outraged his father. He had not done it to scandalize passersby, he wrote in a memoir, “Boston Boy.”

Instead, he wrote, “I wanted to know how it felt to be an outcast. Except for my father’s reaction and for getting sick, it turned out to be quite enjoyable.”

At Northeastern University, Hentoff became editor of a student newspaper and turned it into a crusading publication. When it uncovered a story about trustees backing anti-Semitic publications, the university shut it down.

Hentoff and members of his staff resigned, but he graduated in 1946 with high honors and a devotion to the First Amendment.

His devotion to jazz led to friendships with Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller and other jazz legends. His son reports that he died while listening to Billie Holliday. In 2004, he was named one of six Jazz Masters by the National Endowment for the Arts, the first nonmusician to win the honor.

He reports that he was fired from Down Beat magazine in 1957 after pushing for the publication to hire black writers.

Nat Hentoff leaves us at a time when the free speech he embraced is under widespread attack, particularly on the nation’s campuses, which concerned him greatly. Recently, Judge Jose A. Cabranes, who was Yale University’s first general counsel, noted that,

“Sixty years ago, Chief Justice Earl Warren warned our nation that we had a choice. Either ‘teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate,’ or ‘our civilization will stagnate and die.’ There was no third option. Today, we face the choice again. Recent attempts to shame professors for unpopular views and to curtail the due process rights of those accused of misconduct are cause for alarm. Especially when academic freedom is endangered at places such as Yale—long celebrated as a leader on freedom of expression—we know that the erosion of academic freedom has become a national problem...Our universities today must pay more than lip service to free expression. They must develop and maintain procedures that protect professors’ ability to teach and learn without fear of retaliation. While political alignments may have flipped, the choice remains the same: academic freedom or civilizational decline.”

The maintenance of a free society requires men and women like Nat Hentoff to defend the freedom of speech of all Americans—even, particularly, those with whom they disagree most strongly. Enemies of free speech can—and do—come from both right and left. To defend only speech with which we agree, Hentoff understood, is not to defend free speech at all. He was saddened to see the intolerance which once characterized some on the right now being adopted

by more and more activists on the left. Intolerance of free speech is equally offensive, he believed, whatever its source.

Nat Hentoff graced our society for 91 years. We have been lucky to have him.