



Nat Hentoff a keen critic of all sides politics

Cathy Young

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After the news that renowned writer and civil liberties champion Nat Hentoff had passed away at 91, a friend of mine tweeted one of Hentoff's columns on then-candidate Donald Trump's "war on press freedom."

Since we live in hyperpartisan times, a Trump fan quickly responded with a snide comment about Hentoff's supposed failure to criticize Barack Obama's media-unfriendly actions. The joke was on Hentoff's would-be detractor: Several people, myself included, supplied links to Hentoff articles assailing Obama's record on the press, such as his hostility to leakers and whistleblowers. If there is one accusation no one could ever have made against Hentoff, it is partisan hypocrisy.

It is no exaggeration to say that Hentoff was one of the heroes of our time. He was a man of remarkable versatility — jazz critic, historian, prolific novelist and commentator. But above all, he was a man of integrity and courage whose dedication to freedom knew no political bias or tribalism.

After many years spent writing for New York's left-wing weekly, *The Village Voice*, and being laid off in 2008, Hentoff became a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank (where I have an unpaid position as a research associate), and began writing for its website. An old-fashioned social democrat on economic issues, he had disagreements with Cato's laissez-faire philosophy — but he shared the institute's commitment to civil liberties, on everything from speech to police abuses.

Hentoff's idiosyncratic views often put him at odds with both left and right. One might look at his career and see constant paradox — or principle. He was a civil libertarian who nonetheless strongly opposed abortion, having come to believe that it destroys a full human life and is thus a violation of the most fundamental liberty — not from a religious standpoint, since he was a staunch atheist, but from a secular humanist one. After Sept. 11, 2001, he passionately opposed the abridgements of civil liberties in the name of combating terrorism — but supported the war in Iraq as a morally justified action to remove a heinous tyrant.

His concern about abuses of power and infringements of rights in the anti-terror effort carried over from the George W. Bush presidency to that of Obama. While he voted for Obama in 2008, he later grew so disgusted with the administration's policies, particularly targeted assassinations by drone strikes, as to call for the president's impeachment.

Hentoff's abiding passion was freedom of speech. His best-known book, published in 1993, was titled "Free Speech for Me — But Not for Thee: How the American Left and Right Relentlessly

Censor Each Other.” His targets included Christian-dominated school boards seeking to ban books from school libraries and feminists seeking to muzzle abortion opponents. His last contribution to a book was a foreword to the 2014 Cato publication of “The Tyranny of Silence” by Fleming Rose, the Danish newspaper editor involved in the firestorm about cartoons viewed as insulting to Islam’s prophet Muhammad.

It is safe to say that every one of Hentoff’s admirers probably disagreed with him about some things. Even some of his fellow free speech advocates may feel that his absolutism went too far (he argued against libel laws, believing that they allowed meritless lawsuits to impose too much of an intimidating burden on the press). But no one could have questioned his dedication to truth and fairness.

Hentoff remained active in his late years, co-writing his columns with his son, attorney Nick Hentoff. It is a pity that he could not have stayed with us longer. The Trump years will need such a voice.