

The Washington Times

A taste for authentic liberalism

Nat Hentoff always savored the ‘Sweet Land of Liberty’

David Keene

January 9, 2017

Nat Hentoff, who died Saturday at age 91, was a champion of a classical liberalism that is no longer in vogue. He believed, above all, in freedom, the individual and the free speech guarantees found in the First Amendment of our Bill of Rights. He was in many ways the conscience of the First Amendment at a time when everyone from the left to right at least professed to believe in the right of those they disagreed with to speak their piece.

He never flinched. He defended the rights of those with whom he disagreed and chastised even his closest associates when he found them wavering in the commitment to fundamental rights. His courage cost him, alienated some with whom he had worked, and sometimes made life difficult. He loved being the outsider always willing to speak to speak truth to power and must have loved the title of a documentary on his life titled “The Pleasures of Being Out of Step.”

Born in 1925, perhaps with a pencil in his hand and a gleam in his eye, Hentoff wrote for the Village Voice for 50 years. He began as the paper’s outstanding jazz critic, but wrote about much else. He loved music and wrote not just about jazz greats like Duke Ellington and Fats Waller, but Merle Haggard and Bob Dylan as well. He wrote novels, short stories, political profiles and, mostly, about the freedoms that allowed him to dub his later column “Sweet Land of Liberty.”

He never compromised, and his refusal to do so often put him at odds with others on the so-called left. He was proudly pro-life and said so repeatedly. He saw “political correctness” for what it is — a threat to free speech and the free exchange of ideas, and he denounced it in its various incarnations. He believed in the right of Americans to “keep and bear arms.” He was appalled at the enemies of free speech who began to dominate America’s campuses as the new century dawned.

In the ‘60s, Hentoff had marched for civil rights and was counted as a friend of radicals like Malcolm X, but was critical of attempts to silence dissenters and soon found himself at odds with an increasingly intolerant left. In 1992, Hentoff wrote “Free Speech for Me — But Not for Thee,” which summed up his feelings about censorship on both the left and right..

In 2009, after 50 years, Hentoff lost his job at the Village Voice. He was told it was due to “budget” concerns, but most believe he had been fired because his libertarianism was increasingly controversial on the left. In the years that followed, he wrote for numerous publications, including The Washington Times, and worked with the Cato Institute. He was honored by and spoke on free speech and privacy at a Conservative Political Action Conference

and served on the advisory board of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which fights for free speech on our campuses.

When the Village Voice cast him adrift, he observed that he would just have to put on his “skunk suit” and saunter off to someone else’s “garden party.” And he did just that. He supported the Iraq war, but was a dogged critic of the Bush administration’s assault on privacy rights in the name of the “War on Terror.” He said he was going to support Barack Obama in 2008, but couldn’t because of the man’s views on partial-birth abortion. Last year he was to be found in the camp of Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky. He had not become a conservative, but remained Nat Hentoff. He was a man who could get up in the morning, look himself in the mirror and see the face of one who had, regardless of what others might say, remained true to his convictions.

When I joined The Times, I made an attempt to get Hentoff to come on-board once again as a regular columnist. I called him and he was amenable, but laid out his conditions. He said he would type out his columns, go over them with a pencil to correct any errors and then fax the copy to me for review. At the time, I didn’t even have a working fax machine in my office so I suggested that he might want to email his copy like everyone else.

“No,” he replied. I don’t have a computer, won’t write on one, so if you want me to write for you we’ll have to do it my way. When you get my copy you can mark it up with your suggested revisions, fax it back to me and eventually we’ll come up with a final version you can use.”

I thought all this over and wondered if we could actually handle this “old-fashioned” technique in the new age of the internet. “Nat,” I said, “you know, Bill Buckley once said that for a writer, the invention of the word-processing computer was the most significant development since the invention of the pencil.”

There was a long pause, and Hentoff finally said, “That’s just one more thing Buckley was wrong about.”