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WINDOW ON THE REAL WORLD

Nat Hentoff, 91: 'Last honest liberal' regularly infuriated the Left

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Nat Hentoff, who described himself as “a Jewish, atheist, civil libertarian, left-wing pro-lifer,” died on Jan. 7 at the age of 91.

Hentoff was a Village Voice contributor and columnist for 50 years and also wrote for The New Yorker, The New York Times, Down Beat and the Wall Street Journal. His more than 25 books included jazz and First Amendment works, novels and memoirs.

Following are excerpts from ‘Nat Hentoff, the last honest liberal’, by Clay Waters, associate opinion editor for Bridge News, written in April 1999:

“The columnist has championed a woman rejected from law school for being white. He has defended a police chaplain fired for saying ‘fag,’ and been shouted down by pro-choice feminists at a pro-life rally. He’s quoted approvingly a charter school founder saying that only when racial categorization is stopped can there be ‘true equal protection of the laws.’ And he quit the ACLU in protest of their position against revealing the results of HIV tests on newborns. By the way, he’s a life-long leftist who has written for the Village Voice since the 1960s.

He’s Nat Hentoff [and his column] consistently flouts his readership’s conventions. ... Greenwich Villager Hentoff was friend of the late Malcolm X, has authored several books on jazz and wrote the liner notes for Bob Dylan’s second album. He’s a freewheelin’ man who has angered about every political faction around, including his own Voice editors. He is no elitist. In the past he’s called into a talk show hosted by Oliver North (Rush Limbaugh was the guest) to agree with them on liberal intolerance for free speech. Recently he appeared on Matt Drudge’s Fox television show to discuss Clinton’s depravity. He’s made common cause with the libertarian Cato Institute against the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO). ‘I just want to go where my fans are,’ he said in a brief phone interview. ‘I prefer not preaching to the choir.’

Hentoff has been set against Clinton ever since the ’92 campaign, when the then-Arkansas governor left the campaign trail in New Hampshire to supervise the execution of convicted murderer Ricky Ray Rector, a retarded man who arguably was not responsible for his actions. He condemns Clinton not so much for his sex life (although for an alleged liberal, Hentoff writes rather sympathetically for Paula Jones), but that ‘Clinton has done more harm to the constitution than any president in American history.’

He fumes at liberals for sticking up for a president he considers ‘a serial violator of our liberties,’ pointing to the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1996, ‘which so greatly cut down [habeas corpus] that innocent people on death row will be executed for years to come.’

In the wake of the Matthew Shepard murder, he refused to join the law-and-order about-face made by liberal activists and instead attacked the resulting proposals of hate-crime legislation as unconstitutional. He's stuck to his civil libertarian principles, even when more and more often he makes points that bring joy to conservatives.

Hentoff's two weekly columns, one in the Voice and one in the Saturday Washington Post, are among the few outlets to take the Kathleen Willey story seriously. Hentoff has also informed his no-doubt seething readership about Clinton's more obscure alleged dalliances, like the former Miss Arkansas Elizabeth Ward Gracen. He devoted an entire column to Juanita Broaddrick weeks before the Wall Street Journal vaulted her 20 year-old allegations of sexual assault by Clinton into the mainstream press. He wrote acidly of a pro-Clinton New York Times piece where the author 'ignores the series of women who have been threatened by Clinton and his agents to keep their silence about his exercising his droit du seigneur on their bodies.' He has even accused Clinton of committing war crimes, an area of attack from which elected Republicans flinch. 'And where were these former anti-Vietnam War protesters when Clinton killed innocent civilians in Iraq as he tried to delay impeachment?'

In other articles, a spiritual side comes through. Hentoff is pro-life, and in 1992 he wrote his most famous apostasy with the left, 'Pro-Choice Bigots,' for the New Republic. In it he lamented Jesse Jackson's lapsed pro-life stand and ripped into the hypocrisy of a Democratic party that speaks of tolerance but brooks no dissent on the abortion issue. He noted that some Voice colleagues stopped speaking to him after he first came out against 'the annual killing of 1.6 million developing human beings.' When I referred to him half-jokingly as an atheist Catholic, he replied dryly, 'atheist will do.'

His most emotionally wrenching column had to do with a related life and death matter. A father who murdered his 12-year-old daughter Tracy had his sentence commuted at the urging of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (a Canadian equivalent of the ACLU). After all, the girl had a severe case of cerebral palsy and suffered acute pain, thus making it a mercy killing.

Hentoff bashes the ACLU for its support of legalizing assisted suicide – 'ignoring its effects on the severely disabled for whom that fatal decision would be made.' Columns like this show a generosity of spirit often lacking in the 'party of compassion.'