



Nat Hentoff: A Civil Libertarian Takes on Obama and the World

By John W. Whitehead
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"Last Tuesday, a friend, an inveterate civil libertarian, called me as broken bodies were still being placed on stretchers. 'This is going to cause a surge by government—local, state, and federal—to shred the Bill of Rights,' he said. 'And it will be cheered by an enthusiastic, indignant public.' If he's right, and American history would indicate he is, the relatively few uncompromising civil libertarians among us will again be regarded with contempt and continuous suspicion by both the authorities and the populace."—Nat Hentoff, following the 9/11 attacks

At the age of 85, Nat Hentoff is a radical in the best sense of the word—a true freedom fighter and warrior journalist with a deep-seated intolerance of injustice. His integrity and willingness to buck the trends have earned him the well-deserved reputation of being one of our nation's most respected, controversial and uncompromising writers.

Armed with a keen understanding of the law and an enviable way with words, brandishing a rapier wit and teeming with moral outrage, Nat has never been one to back down from a fight, and there have been many over the course of his lifetime—one marked by controversy and fueled by his passion for the protection of civil liberties and human rights. There was the time Nat testified for stand-up comic and political satirist Lenny Bruce during his obscenity trial; stood up for a woman rejected from law school for being white; called into Oliver North's talk show to voice his agreement about liberal intolerance for free speech; and resigned from the ACLU in protest of their position on assisted suicide, as well as their position against revealing the results of HIV tests on newborn babies.

This is also a man who has walked among political and cultural giants and lived to tell the tale. He was friends with Malcolm X, was labeled "the Antichrist" by Louis Farrakhan, and came to know some of the most talented jazzmen of all time—Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, and Dizzy Gillespie, to name a few. He also wrote liner notes for such musical greats as Bob Dylan, Billie Holiday, and Aretha Franklin.

A self-described uncategorizable libertarian, Hentoff adds he is also a "Jewish atheist, civil libertarian, pro-lifer." Born in Boston on June 10, 1925, Hentoff received a B.A. with honors from Northeastern University and did graduate work at Harvard. From 1953 to 1957, he was associate editor of *Down Beat* magazine. He has written many books on jazz, biographies and novels, including children's books. His articles have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*,



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Constitutional attorney and author John W. Whitehead is founder and president of The Rutherford Institute. His latest book *The Change Manifesto* (Sourcebooks) is now available.

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Commonwealth, the *New Republic*, the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker*, where he was a staff writer for more than 25 years. In 1980, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in Education and an American Bar Association Silver Gavel Award for his coverage of the law and criminal justice in his columns. In 1985, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Laws by Northeastern University. For 50 years, Hentoff wrote a weekly column for the *Village Voice*. When that position was terminated on December 31, 2008, Hentoff joined the Cato Institute as a Senior Fellow.

Despite an illustrious career as a journalist, there has been no shortage of derogatory labels applied to Nat by his critics, including, as he notes in his memoir, *Speaking Freely*:

a radical (according to the FBI): an "enslaver of women" (according to pro-choicers); a suspiciously unpredictable civil-libertarian (according to the ACLU); a dangerous defender of alleged pornography (according to my friend Catherine MacKinnon); an irrelevant, anachronistic integrationist (according to assorted black nationalists); and, as an editor at the Washington Post once said, not unkindly—"a general pain in the ass."

Indeed, in keeping with his role as a socio-political gadfly, Nat has managed to anger nearly every political faction by sticking to his principles, regardless of the trouble it stirs up. When Nat first declared himself a pro-lifer, women in his *Village Voice* office actually stopped speaking to him. Likewise, although ACLU affiliates around the country had for years invited him to speak at fundraising dinners, after declaring himself a pro-lifer, all such invitations stopped. His outspoken denunciation of President Clinton only increased his isolation in liberal circles (he said that Clinton had "done more harm to the Constitution than any president in American history," and called him "a serial violator of our liberties").

Even his forced departure from the *Village Voice* could not dampen Nat's zeal nor temper his voice. Most recently, Hentoff has been an outspoken critic of Barack Obama's presidency:

Obama has little, if any, principles except to aggrandize and make himself more and more important. You see that in his foreign policy. Obama lacks a backbone—both a constitutional backbone and a personal backbone. This is a man who is causing us and will cause us a great deal of harm constitutionally and personally. This is the first administration that has scared me.

At the end of the day, what sets Nat Hentoff apart is the fact that he has never lost his sense of rage, nor his eternal optimism. "Nat Hentoff has never allowed his thought to harden into ideology," writes Allen Barra for the *Village Voice*. "He's never lost his talent to agitate us and make us rethink our own positions—to make sure that our minds watch ourselves."

It's people like Nat Hentoff who keep us honest, inspire us, and push us to think. As he once told me:

I am optimistic. I have to be optimistic, as I know you are. That is why you keep writing and keep doing what you do. You have to do this because we have been

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through very dark periods before. There are enough people who are starting to be actively involved that we can turn things around. And we need to encourage others to become involved.

Nat Hentoff, thanks for being "a general pain in the ass." We've all been the better for it.

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