



Nat Hentoff Has Never Lost His Sense of Rage

By **John W. Whitehead**
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My lives as 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..."--Nat Hentoff

Nat Hentoff has had a life well spent, one chock full of controversy fueled by his passion for the protection of civil liberties and human rights. Hentoff is known as a civil libertarian, free speech activist, anti-death penalty advocate, pro-lifer and not uncommon critic of the ideological left.

At 84, Nat Hentoff is an American classic who has never shied away from an issue. For example, he defended a woman rejected from law school because she was Caucasian; called into a talk show hosted by Oliver North to agree with him on liberal intolerance for free speech; was a friend to the late Malcolm X; and wrote the liner notes for Bob Dylan's second album.

Hentoff, a lifelong leftist, has angered nearly every political faction. A self-proclaimed "Jewish atheist, civil libertarian, left-wing pro-lifer," Hentoff is one of a few who has stuck to his principles through his many years of work, regardless of the trouble it stirred up. Simply put, Hentoff says what he thinks and does so clearly.

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*, *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. But that publication announced that he had been terminated on December 31, 2008. In February 2009, Hentoff joined the Cato Institute as a



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Senior Fellow.

Although Hentoff has always considered himself to be a liberal, his pro-life position is hardly tolerated by fellow left-wingers. Arguing that a human not yet born still counts as one of our species, with all the genetic information that makes each human being unique, Hentoff is almost alone when he makes the case as a liberal that human life in the womb should not be exterminated. When he first declared himself a pro-lifer, women in his *Village Voice* office stopped speaking to him. And although Hentoff had been invited to speak at Nazareth College in Rochester (a secular institution), he was uninvited two weeks before the lecture. Members on the lecture committee at Nazareth apparently felt that his stance on abortion was outside the limit of what students could safely hear.

Although ACLU affiliates around the country had for years invited Hentoff to speak at fundraising dinners, after declaring himself a pro-lifer--and even though he agrees with most other ACLU policies--all such invitations stopped. Hentoff later 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. He has since re-joined the ACLU, citing his appreciation for their efforts to alert the country to the dangers posed by the Bush administration's post-9/11 policies.

Hentoff has even criticized the Democratic Party for its past practice of speaking about tolerance, yet tolerating no dissent within its ranks on the abortion issue. Nevertheless, men and women from all over the country identify with Hentoff, writing that they thought themselves to be the solitary liberal pro-lifers in their office, at school and at home and were surprised to find Hentoff in the same position. Even some feminists are on his side--the Feminists for Life of America, for example. But with or without supporters, Hentoff's opinions remain principled and without hypocrisy.

During Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign for the presidency, Hentoff set himself against the President, saying that Clinton "has done more harm to the Constitution than any president in American history." Hentoff defied liberals who defended Clinton, whom he considered "a serial violator of our liberties" during his presidency.

When I came under attack by the Clinton White House and was labeled part of the "vast right wing conspiracy" for being an attorney in the *Paula Jones* case, Hentoff came to my defense. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Hentoff called me a "conspirator for the Constitution," citing my work on behalf of the Bill of Rights, and said the President could benefit from reading my weekly commentaries.

Hentoff's views on the rights of Americans to write, think and speak freely are expressed in his columns. He is also an authority on First Amendment defense, the Bill of Rights, the Supreme Court, students' rights and education. Friends and critics alike describe him as the kind of writer, and citizen, that all should aspire to be--"less interested in 'exclusives' than in 'making a difference.'" Critiquing Hentoff's autobiography, *Speaking Freely*, Nicholas von Hoffman refers to him as "a trusting man, a gentle man, just and undeviatingly

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consistent."

Hentoff took to heart the words from his mentor, I. F. "Izzy" Stone, the renowned investigative journalist who died in 1989: "If you're in this business because you want to change the world, get another day job. If you are able to make a difference, it will come incrementally, and you might not even know about it. You have to get the story and keep on it because it has to be told."

Nat Hentoff has earned the well-deserved reputation of being one of our nation's most respected, controversial and uncompromising writers. He began his career at the *Village Voice* because he wanted a place to write freely on anything he cared about. And his departure from the publication has neither dampened his zeal nor tempered his voice. For Nat Hentoff, like his mentor Izzy Stone, will never lose his sense of rage.

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