

Nat Hentoff and the decay of American liberalism

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The Clinton impeachment crisis has put American liberals and radicals to the test, and they have been found largely wanting. Very few have been able to appraise the events in a serious and objective manner or provide the general population with any semblance of principled political leadership. The crisis has exposed the intellectual decay of this social grouping.

The case of Nat Hentoff, columnist for the *Village Voice* and *Washington Post* and until a few years ago a member of the staff of the *New Yorker*, is a peculiar one. Hentoff, born in 1925, made his name in the 1950s and 1960s as a music critic and associate editor of *Down Beat*, the jazz magazine. At the time he championed a number of innovative jazz and folk artists. I first came across his name on the liner notes to one of Bob Dylan's earliest albums. He has long promoted himself as an advocate of civil liberties.

Hentoff has come out in support of impeachment, echoing many of the arguments of the extreme right. In the October 21-27, 1998 issue of the *Voice*, for example, he comments: "Committing perjury before a federal grand jury, as Clinton is revealed to have done, is not a private act, no matter the private behavior being lied about. And perjury is the most dangerous of all public acts because it can hide all other crimes. Most repellent is what Bill Clinton has done to Paula Jones. ... Clinton is not fit to be president, and his felonies--perjury along with obstruction of justice--will lead to his impeachment."

In a piece headlined "What's Happening to the Left?" (*Village Voice*, January 6-12, 1999) Hentoff sneers at the notion that "those working to remove the president" are "staging a coup d'état that is driven by 'sexual McCarthyism' and a consuming hatred of this president."

Hentoff makes two arguments in favor of impeachment. First, Clinton is a sexual predator who terrorizes his former lovers. "It has become brutally clear that any former object of his lust who threatens his presidency should be put into the Witness Protection Program," he writes. Second, Clinton is no friend of civil liberties and has, in fact, mounted a systematic campaign against democratic rights.

Hentoff makes the first charge based on a series of unproven allegations that have been promoted primarily by organizations and publications with an ax to grind. He cites the *Washington Times*, the *Toronto Sun* and the *Wall Street Journal* without a single reference to their political pedigree. In line with the House Republican managers, Hentoff treats Paula Jones' legal action, a sexual harassment suit instigated, directed and financed by organized right-wing groups, as a legitimate civil rights case. Remarkably he even comes to the defense of that well known dirty tricks operative and one of the most despised individuals in America, Linda Tripp. Hentoff paints Tripp as a victim of threats and intimidations, citing a *Wall Street Journal Europe* article in which she claimed to have been threatened by a Clinton aide "if she went public with criticism of the White House."

A supposed constitutional expert, Hentoff turns a blind eye to Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's trampling of democratic rights. His targets are those genuinely in need of "protection": Susan McDougal, Julie Hiatt Steele, Webster Hubbell. The methods of Starr and his associates are relentless and intrusive investigation, the threat of prison or, at best, personal bankruptcy. None of this naked use of state power disturbs our defender of civil liberties. Nor does he express any concern about the involvement of a cabal of reactionary lawyers and judges, all sworn enemies of democratic rights, in the drive to oust Clinton. And what of the presumption of innocence? After all, Clinton has not been found guilty of a single crime. Hentoff has no comment.

After the *Washington Post* revealed that right-winger Rep. Bob Barr (R-Ga.) addressed a June 1998 meeting of the white supremacist Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC), Hentoff came to his defense. In "Barr's Other Side" (*Washington Post*, January 9, 1999), he described the Georgia Congressman's alliance with the American Civil Liberties Union on "a number of privacy issues." He accepted as more or less good coin Barr's claim that he had not known of the CCC's racist positions.

Barr comes from Georgia; the CCC is well-known in

southern political circles as the heir to the notorious White Citizens Councils. Mississippi's governor and dozens of state legislators belong to the rabidly racist and anti-Semitic group. Barr, a CIA employee in the 1970s, knew perfectly well to whom he was speaking; he was invited, after all, because he holds views acceptable to the group. If Barr opposes at this point the strengthening of certain police powers, it is because his national political constituency includes the ultra-right Militia and Patriot-type movements, whose activities come into conflict with those of the federal government. Hentoff might as well claim Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh and his cohorts as allies and co-thinkers on "privacy issues."

Clinton, for his part, is a conservative bourgeois politician. His policies--including the attacks on democratic rights, the destruction of social programs, the aggression against the Iraqi and other peoples around the world--represent the interests of capitalism. Socialists don't oppose Clinton for this or that peccadillo, this or that failing, but from the standpoint of building up an independent movement of the working class.

Hentoff's arguments are similar to those advanced by *Nation* columnists Alexander Cockburn and Christopher Hitchens, who present the present administration's right-wing record as a rationale for their own inability to oppose its even more reactionary opponents. The notion of mounting opposition to Clinton from the left, from the point of view of the working population and its interests, is inconceivable to all these individuals. Seeing no possibility, viability or even desirability of a socialist alternative, they cede to the right-wing the job of removing Clinton.

There is a connection between ends and means. The reactionary aims of the ultra-right are expressed in the squalid issues they raise and the conspiratorial methods they employ. A government operated by Barr and such forces would do everything in its power to terrorize left-wing opponents and the working class as a whole. The installation of such a regime is the goal of the present drive to oust Clinton from the White House.

The present crisis has exposed the fraudulence of Hentoff's claim to be a crusader for civil liberties. Any objective observer, even if he or she accepted the columnist's indictment of Clinton, would be struck by his disregard for crucial legal and political questions. Indeed, after reading a number of his pieces, one draws the unhappy conclusion Hentoff has a good deal in common with Starr and his thugs: self-righteousness, hypocritical moralizing, indifference to democratic rights. At any rate, he obviously feels no discomfort in their company.

An individual's political evolution is a complex matter. At first glance it may have a good deal of the accidental about

it. One might say, for example, that in Hentoff's case, a certain obtuseness and the inability to make a coherent analysis of social forces have probably not helped. But is this merely an individual failing? Organic laziness and carelessness, the resistance of essentially comfortable social layers to solving difficult problems--this has played an objective role in the downfall of American liberalism and radicalism.

Hentoff's support for the Starr impeachment drive represents a nodal point in his movement to the right. His adherence to the anti-abortion cause some years ago represented another. He has officially distanced himself from the "left," citing as an excuse the anti-free speech antics of various radical groups. "I used to call myself a liberal," he says.

In the most general sense, what accounts for the degeneration of Hentoff and others like him? The great social polarization of American society has lifted former radicals and oppositionists economically. For decades they have stepped over the homeless on the streets of the major cities; poverty and social misery are accepted now as facts of life. Protest against injustice in these circles has an increasingly hollow and ritualistic character. No one believes anything is going to get better. Secretly or not so secretly, they identify more and more with those at the top of society--or envy them--and fear those who have been marginalized and impoverished. There are more than a few closet authoritarians in American intellectual circles.

Hentoff operated his particular little shop--specializing in First Amendment rights--for years, at no great cost to himself, tolerated by the establishment as an eccentric, one of the officially sanctioned 'curmudgeons.' The present crisis has usefully revealed the axis around which his life has come to revolve: defense of the existing moral and social order. Perhaps without his being fully conscious of it, he has gone from one side of the fence to the other, in the process lining up with the biggest and filthiest bullies. There is nothing tragic in this, Hentoff was never a significant figure. But it is instructive.



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