

War: Realities and Myths by Chris Hedges



Today, we are at a turning point in our history. We can no longer continue to accept tradition for tradition's sake. We can no longer go on playing the same old war games without eventually becoming conscious of the dimensions of the destruction involved. We have no other choice but to become fully conscious of the darker aspects of our own cultural heritage. Only then will we cease to pass them blindly on to future generations.

"Victims of a devastating trauma may never be the same (again) biologically. It does not matter if it was the incessant terror of combat, torture, repeated abuse in childhood, or a one-time experience."

Dennis S. Charney, M.D., Dean for Academic and Scientific Affairs, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, Professor of Psychiatry and Neuroscience.

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Hedges has a Master of Divinity from Harvard University. His outlook is influenced by moral writers and ethicists such as George Orwell, Samuel Johnson, Karl Popper, Hannah Arendt, Elias Canetti and theologians William Stringfellow, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Abraham Heschel, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others.

He began his career reporting on the conflict in El Salvador in 1983.

He spent nearly two decades as a foreign correspondent in Central America, the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans. He has reported from more than fifty countries, and has worked for The Christian Science Monitor, National Public Radio, The Dallas Morning News and The New York Times, where he spent fifteen years. Hedges was part of The New York Times team that won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for the paper's coverage of global terrorism. He received the 2002 Amnesty International Global Award for Human Rights Journalism. As well as Arabic, Latin and ancient Greek, he speaks French and Spanish. He currently writes for numerous publications including Foreign Affairs, Harper's magazine, The New York Review of Books, and Granta.

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The vanquished know war. They see through the empty jingoism of those who use the abstract words of glory, honor, and patriotism to mask the cries of the wounded, the senseless killing, war profiteering, and chest-pounding grief. They know the lies the victors often do not acknowledge, the lies covered up in stately war memorials and mythic war narratives, filled with words of courage and comradeship. They know the lies that permeate the thick, self-important memoirs by amoral statesmen who make wars but do not know war.

The vanquished know the essence of war – death. They grasp that war is necrophilia. They see that war is a state of almost pure sin with its goals of hatred and destruction. They know how war fosters alienation, leads inevitably to nihilism, and is a turning away from the sanctity and preservation of life. All other narratives about war too easily fall prey to the allure and seductiveness of violence, as well as the attraction of the godlike power that comes with the license to kill with impunity.

But the words of the vanquished come later, sometimes long after the war, when grown men and women unpack the suffering they endured as children, what it was like to see their mother or father killed or taken away, or what it was like to lose their homes, their community, their security, and be discarded as human refuse. But by then few listen. The truth about war comes out, but usually too late. We are assured by the war-makers that these stories have no bearing on the glorious violent enterprise the nation is about to inaugurate. And, lapping up the myth of war and its sense of empowerment, we prefer not to look.

We see the war in Iraq only through the distorted lens of the occupiers. The embedded reporters, dependent on the military for food and transportation as well as security, have a natural and understandable tendency, one I have myself felt, to protect those who are protecting them. They are not allowed to report outside of the unit and are, in effect, captives. They have no relationships with the occupied, essential to all balanced reporting of conflicts, but only with the Marines and soldiers who drive through desolate mud-walled towns and pump grenades and machine-gun bullets into houses, leaving scores of nameless dead and wounded in their wake. The reporters admire and laud these fighters for their physical courage. They feel protected as well by the jet fighters and heavy artillery and throaty rattle of machine guns. And the reporting, even among those who struggle to keep some distance, usually descends into a shameful cheerleading.

There is no more candor in Iraq or Afghanistan than there was in Vietnam, but in the age of live satellite feeds the military has perfected the appearance of candor. What we are fed is the myth of war. For the myth of war, the myth of glory and honor sells newspapers and boosts ratings, real war reporting does not. Ask the grieving parents of Pat Tillman. Nearly every embedded war correspondent sees his or her mission as sustaining civilian and army morale. This is what passes for coverage on FOX, MSNBC or CNN. In wartime, as Senator Hiram Johnson reminded us in 1917, "truth is the first casualty."

All our knowledge of the war in Iraq has to be viewed as lacking the sweep and depth that will come one day, perhaps years from now, when a small Iraqi boy or girl reaches adulthood and unfolds for us the sad and tragic story of the invasion and bloody occupation of their nation.

I have spent most of my adult life in war. I began two decades ago covering wars in Central America, where I spent five years, then the Middle East, where I spent seven, and the Balkans where I covered the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo. My life has been marred, let me say deformed, by the organized industrial violence that year after year was an intimate part of my existence. I have watched young men bleed to death on lonely

Central American dirt roads and cobblestone squares in Sarajevo. I have looked into the eyes of mothers, kneeling over the lifeless and mutilated bodies of their children. I have stood in warehouses with rows of corpses, including children, and breathed death into my lungs. I carry within me the ghosts of those I worked with, my comrades, now gone.

I have felt the attraction of violence. I know its seductiveness, excitement and the powerful addictive narcotic it can become. The young soldiers, trained well enough to be disciplined but encouraged to maintain their naive adolescent belief in invulnerability, have in wartime more power at their fingertips than they will ever have again. They catapult from being minimum wage employees at places like Burger King, facing a life of dead-end jobs with little hope of health insurance and adequate benefits, to being part of, in the words of the Marines, "the greatest fighting force on the face of the earth." The disparity between what they were and what they have become is breathtaking and intoxicating. This intoxication is only heightened in wartime when all taboos are broken. Murder goes unpunished and often rewarded. The thrill of destruction fills their days with wild adrenaline highs, strange grotesque landscapes that are hallucinogenic, all accompanied by a sense of purpose and comradeship, overpowers the alienation many left behind. They become accustomed to killing, carrying out acts of slaughter with no more forethought than they take to relieve themselves. And the abuses committed against the helpless prisoners in Abu Ghraib or Guantánamo are not aberrations but the real face of war. In wartime all human beings become objects, objects either to gratify or destroy or both. And almost no one is immune. The contagion of the crowd sees to that.

"Force," Simone Weil wrote, "is as pitiless to the man who possess it, or thinks he does, as it is to his victim. The second it crushes; the first it intoxicates."

This myth, the lie, about war, about ourselves, is imploding our democracy. We shun introspection and self-criticism. We ignore truth, to embrace the strange, disquieting certitude and hubris offered by the radical Christian Right. These radical Christians draw almost exclusively from the book of Revelations, the only time in the Bible where Jesus sanctions violence, peddling a vision of Christ as the head of a great and murderous army of heavenly avengers. They rarely speak about Christ's message of love, forgiveness and compassion. They relish the cataclysmic destruction that will befall unbelievers, including those such as myself, who they dismiss as "nominal Christians." They divide the world between good and evil, between those anointed to act as agents of God and those who act as agents of Satan. The cult of masculinity and esthetic of violence pervades their ideology. Feminism and homosexuality are forces, believers are told, that have rendered the American male physically and spiritually impotent. Jesus, for the Christian Right, is a man of action, casting out demons, battling the Anti-Christ, attacking hypocrites and castigating the corrupt. The language is one not only of exclusion, hatred and fear, but a call for apocalyptic violence, in short the language of war.

As the war grinds forward, as we sink into a morass of our own creation, as our press and political opposition, and yes even our great research universities, remain complacent and passive, as we refuse to confront the forces that have crippled us outside our gates and are working to cripple us within, the ideology of the Christian Right, so intertwined with intolerance and force, will become the way we speak not only to others but among ourselves.

In war, we always deform ourselves, our essence. We give up individual conscience – maybe even consciousness – for contagion of the crowd, the rush of patriotism, the belief that we must stand together as a nation in moments of extremity. To make a moral choice, to defy war's enticement, to find moral courage, can be self-destructive.

The attacks on the World Trade Center illustrate that those who oppose us, rather than coming from another moral universe, have been schooled well in modern warfare. The dramatic explosions, the fireballs, the victims plummeting to their deaths, the collapse of the towers in Manhattan, were straight out of Hollywood. Where else, but from the industrialized world, did the suicide bombers learn that huge explosions and death above a city skyline are a peculiar and effective form of communication? They have mastered the language we have taught them. They understand that the use of indiscriminate violence against innocents is a way to make a statement. We leave the same calling cards. We delivered such incendiary messages in Vietnam, Serbia, Afghanistan and Iraq. It was Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara who in the summer of 1965 defined the bombing raids that would kill hundreds of thousands of civilians north of Saigon as a means of communication to the Communist regime in Hanoi.

The most powerful antiwar testaments, of war and what war does to us, are those that eschew images of combat. It is the suffering of the veteran whose body and mind are changed forever because he or she served a nation that sacrificed them, the suffering of families and children caught up in the unforgiving maw of war, which begin to tell the story of war. But we are not allowed to see dead bodies, at least of our own soldiers, nor do we see the wounds that forever mark a life, the wounds that leave faces and bodies horribly disfigured by burns or

shrapnel. We never watch the agony of the dying. War is made palatable. It is sanitized. We are allowed to taste war's perverse thrill, but spared from seeing war's consequences. The wounded and the dead are swiftly carted offstage. And for this I blame the press, which willingly hides from us the effects of bullets, roadside bombs and rocket-propelled grenades, which sat at the feet of those who lied to make this war possible and dutifully reported these lies and called it journalism.

War is always about this betrayal. It is about the betrayal of the young by the old, idealists by cynics and finally soldiers by politicians. Those who pay the price, those who are maimed forever by war, however, are crumpled up and thrown away. We do not see them. We do not hear them. They are doomed, like wandering spirits, to float around the edges of our consciousness, ignored, even reviled. The message they bring is too painful for us to hear. We prefer the myth of war, the myth of glory, honor, patriotism and heroism, words that in the terror and brutality of combat are empty, meaningless and obscene.

We are losing the war in Iraq. We are an isolated and reviled nation. We are pitiless to others weaker than ourselves. We have lost sight of our democratic ideals. Thucydides wrote of Athens' expanding empire and how this empire led it to become a tyrant abroad and then a tyrant at home. The tyranny Athens imposed on others,

it finally imposed on itself. If we do not confront the lies and hubris told to justify the killing and mask the destruction carried out in our name in Iraq, if we do not grasp the moral corrosiveness of empire and occupation, if we continue to allow force and violence to be our primary form of communication, if we do not remove from power our flag-waving, cross-bearing versions of the Taliban, we will not so much defeat dictators such as Saddam Hussein as become them.

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Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)
Interview with Chris Hedges – 6 February 2007
American Fascists - The Christian Right and the War on America
<http://www.cbc.ca/thehour/video.php?id=1357>



War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning, Chris Hedges
 Amnesty International USA – Amnesty Magazine
http://www.amnestyusa.org/amnestynow/war_meaning.html



The Christian Right and the Rise of American Fascism
 Chris Hedges - Public information project of the Center
 for Religion, Ethics, and Social Policy at Cornell University
http://www.theocracywatch.org/chris_hedges_nov24_04.htm



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