

ColdTYPE SPECIAL

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD



SILENCING DISSENT

NIGHTMARE ON COMMENCEMENT DAY



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June 2003

Introducing Chris Hedges

By Danny Schechter

YOUR NAME IS CHRIS HEDGES and you are a journalist's journalist. You have the job so many crave, so many fantasize about – foreign correspondent for the New York Times. There was hardly a war you didn't cover, and not from the armchair or the press room. You were there, in the trenches, on the frontlines, walking with refugees, comforting wounded people, experiencing war's horrors. You smelled war. You tasted it. You didn't seem ever to get enough of war's horrors even as you confronted your readers with them.

You were in El Salvador when I met you in the 1980's, covering a war known for its death squads and US intervention, for murdered nuns and bloodshed that claimed the life of the beloved Catholic Archbishop Romero, a man who spoke so eloquently about the plight of the poor. You were there with all your senses engaged, not just looking for the story, but determined to understand its hidden dynamics. You started at the bottom, with the people and how they lived, and then you tried to find out why they had died. At the same time, you asked deeper questions about your own role, and the role played by your colleagues. You came to see that many of them enjoyed the spectacle and were excited by the adrenaline rush. And you realized that war gave their lives meaning.

Suddenly, this was not just about the politics or the issues or the competing claims by different sides. It transcended the egos of brutal men and the rationalizations that lead to the pulling of triggers and the taking of lives. It was personal.

And beneath it all were the challenging questions that shake up and transform people's lives: How do you witness so much pain and go home to the comfort and indifference of your American life? How do

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you shuttle in and out of war zones as a visitor, with the privilege of a press pass that allows an exit from nightmares that few escape? You come and go and count the casualties for a culture that erases its memory as quickly as it forms it.

Questions like these began to percolate in the mind of man whose professional judgement and skeptical skills had been finely honed. Emotion began to creep into a sensibility that had long prized its ability to separate the personal from the product, the report from the reaction. You, who had covered societies in conflict, were in conflict with your role as passive observer. You chose to walk in another direction, to leave the safety and security of your button-down, just-the-facts-ma'am role with the New York Times. You wrote books, and spoke out on talk shows and in interviews.

As you challenged yourself, you began to challenge us.

And then the moment came to speak at college graduation, the place where great thoughts are thought and deep criticisms heard. But there were those who didn't want to be challenged or to hear your message. They jeered. They booed. They showed how hard it is for dissent to be heard in an era when our President believes you are either 'with us or against us.'

And suddenly you, Chris Hedges, were perceived by some dunderheads in Illinois – land of Lincoln, the Haymarket protests and Chicago Seven dissenters – as being a traitor.

You have discovered the limits of tolerance in Bush's America.

But don't be discouraged or dissuaded. The whole country heard you. And the world beyond its borders. Your thoughts have reached far more ears than they would had the disruption not occurred.

And please, dear readers, all of you who read the speech that evoked so much concern, remember this: It is a rule from the history of ideas first enunciated by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer:

"All truth passes through three stages. First it is ridiculed. Second it is violently opposed. Third it is accepted as self-evident." #



The silencing of dissent on graduation day

A New York Times journalist discovers the threat to freedom of speech in the USA

By Amy Goodman and Chris Hedges

Democracy Now!

“Speaker disrupts RC graduation” – this is the headline in the Rockford Register Star in Illinois. The article describes how commencement speaker Chris Hedges was booed off the stage for making an anti-war speech at the Rockford College graduation day. The paper reports that two days later, graduates and family members “are still reeling.” They had envisioned a “go out and make your mark send-off.”

Hedges is a Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times reporter and veteran war correspondent who has reported from war-torn countries for 15 years. He is also the author of the acclaimed “War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning.”

But Rockford College officials pulled the plug on his microphone three minutes after he began to speak. The college president told Hedges to wrap it up, and he resumed his speech to the sound of boos and foghorns. Some graduates and audience mem-

bers turned their backs to Hedges. Others rushed up the aisle to protest the remarks; one student tossed his cap and gown to the stage before leaving.

Chris Hedges joined Democracy Now! on May 21, 2003 to speak with host Amy Goodman about what happened.

AMY GOODMAN: Just tell us what happened this weekend. Why did you go to Rockford College in Illinois?

CHRIS HEDGES: I was invited to give the commencement address. Given that the book is an explication of war and the poison that war is and what it does to individuals and societies and that since the book came out I have spoken extensively about that, that is, of course, what I was prepared to speak about when I got to Rockford.

What I was not prepared for was the response. I have certainly spoken at events where people disagreed – that is to be expected. But to be silenced and to have people clamber onto the platform with the threat of physical violence was something new, and frightening.

Transcript of May 21, 2003 interview on the national U.S. listener-sponsored radio and television show “Democracy Now!”



GOODMAN: Did the police have to take you off?

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"The tragedy is that – and I've seen it in conflict after conflict or society after society that plunges into war – with that kind of rabid nationalism comes racism and intolerance and a dehumanization of the other. And it's an emotional response. People find a kind of ecstasy, a kind of belonging, a kind of obliteration of their alienation in that patriotic fervor that always does come in war time"

HEDGES: People had to be escorted. I was trying to read the speech so I wasn't sort of watching what was going around me but I believe about three students managed to get on the platform, they had to be escorted off. And then as the diplomas were being handed out, campus security took me off campus. I left before the graduation ceremony was concluded.

GOODMAN: And what was the response of other officials on the stage?

HEDGES: I think all of us were surprised at how vociferous the reaction was and how angry people were. It began almost before I said anything and I think you'll hear that in the tape. I really didn't manage to get much out before significant sectors of the crowd began to drown me out and made it very hard for anyone, I think, in the audience to hear what I was saying. So I really didn't have much of a chance to say anything.

GOODMAN: You decided to continue the speech though, from beginning to end.

HEDGES: The speech was longer than it was, it should have been a little longer, it was cut

short. But I was determined not to let them determine when I would finish speaking and I think the college president felt the same way. At the same time he didn't want it to go on for another hour. But he didn't want to let the crowd determine that it was over, but I didn't finish, no.

GOODMAN: The mic was pulled twice? Was cut off?

HEDGES: Right.

GOODMAN: Who cut it?

HEDGES: I don't know. I don't know who cut it. It was probably cut at the source because I didn't see any activity around the podium.

GOODMAN: I'm looking at the Rockford Register Star, the latest report out of there, as it says: "The Rockford College family debated what went wrong at its Spring graduation ceremony that featured New York Times reporter and anti-war advocate Chris Hedges. When do people listen to ideas? When do people think critically and disagree? When do people sit respectfully and is there a time for civility to be lost? These and more questions discussed at a meeting on the campus, the Alma Mater of Jane Addams. Students, faculty and staff didn't reach a consensus, but college President Paul Pribbenow maintains students should be challenged by commencement speakers. He said, 'commencement is one of the last moments you have with students. I want commencement to be more than just a pop speech.' Well, Chris Hedges, you went to Jane Addams' school, to Rockford College. Who was Jane Addams?"

HEDGES: Well, she was one of the great moral and intellectual figures of the 20th Century. She founded

Hull House, which was for immigrants – this was sort of before the state got involved in

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social welfare and she did amazing things like gather immigrants at Hull House – they produced the first production of Sophocles’ Ajax. She was just a remarkable figure, a remarkable intellect and a pacifist who won the Nobel Prize for Peace and spoke out against World War I, against American entry into the war and she was booed off the stage, for instance, at Carnegie Hall. So all I knew about Rockford College was this titanic figure in American intellectual thought and one of the great sort of, moral leaders of our country. So, to be shouted down at her Alma Mater – there’s a very sad kind of irony to that, of course.

GOODMAN: So you were taken off by security?

HEDGES: Well yeah. I think what was so disturbing was that the crowd wasn’t just angry, but there was that undercurrent or possibility of violence. The fact that people actually stormed up past those to get onto the podium and there was a feeling that it was better to have me removed from the ceremony before the conclusion, before the awarding of the diplomas. So the campus security sort of hustled me out as they were handing out the diplomas.

GOODMAN: I wonder if Jane Addams was treated in the same way when she was booed off the stage. Jane Addams who, in addition to be the founder of Hull House in Chicago, was the first international President of WILPF, the Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom and won the Nobel Peace Prize.

HEDGES: Yeah, she was a great figure and if I take any comfort it’s that she would have not only understood but I believe probably applauded.

GOODMAN: And so, let’s talk about the conclusions you’ve arrived at that you’ve shared with the students. Did anyone come up to you

afterwards to talk about why they had responded and did you have a sense that it was a majority or just a vocal minority?

HEDGES: I don’t think it was a majority, but it was a significant minority, I mean, large enough that they disrupted the commencement exercises. No, no one could really ... a few people or two, I believe it was all sort of a rush, as I was escorted to leave I think two students just came up to me to say thank you. But I wasn’t really able to talk to students afterwards.

GOODMAN: Which you had originally planned to do?

HEDGES: Yes. I certainly didn’t plan to leave immediately.

GOODMAN: You are the author of “War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning.” You have reported from many war zones, you’ve been in Guatemala, you’ve been in El Salvador, you’ve been in Bosnia, you were in the Iraq during the Persian Gulf War, you were held by Iraqi Republican Guard. Can you talk about some of those experiences?

HEDGES: You know, as I looked out on the crowd, that is exactly what my book is about. It is about the suspension of individual conscience, and probably consciousness, for the contagion of the crowd for that euphoria that comes with patriotism. The tragedy is that – and I’ve seen it in conflict after conflict or society after society that plunges into war – with that kind of rabid nationalism comes racism and intolerance and a dehumanization of the other. And it’s an emotional response. People find a kind of ecstasy, a kind of belonging, a kind of obliteration of their alienation in that patriotic fervor that always does come in war time.

As I gave my talk and I looked out on the crowd, I was essentially witnessing things that I had witnessed in the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina



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"What happens when we wage war without justifiable cause. What happens to ourselves? What happens to others? I mean this is the currency of the book and something I'm sort of ringing the alarm bells against. And there was a kind of symbiotic relationship between everything that I've experienced and everything that was happening in that crowd"

or in squares in Belgrade or anywhere else. Crowds, especially crowds that become hunting packs are very frightening.

People chanted the kind of cliches and aphorisms and jingoes that are handed to you by the state. "God Bless America" or people were chanting "send him to France" – this kind of stuff and that kind of contagion leads ultimately to tyranny, it's very dangerous and it has to be stopped.

I've seen it in effect and take over countries. But of course, it breaks my heart when I see it in my country. That's essentially what I was looking at was in some ways a mirror of what I was trying to speak about. And I think I managed to touch upon it somewhat when I talked upon this notion of comradeship as a suppression of self awareness and self-possession to sort of follow along, locked in the embrace of a nation, or of a group, or of a national group unthinkingly, blindly. And there is a kind of undeniable euphoria in that. And that's what I was looking at.

I mean this was a visceral and an emotional reaction. Nobody really spent much time, or I didn't have much time to begin to explain the thoughts that I was getting across. And, of

course, it was interpreted as anti-military which it is not. I mean, what I write about in the book and what I speak about is about war: how war is used as an instrument, the danger of war, why war should always be a last resort. What happens when we wage war without justifiable cause. What happens to ourselves? What happens to others? I mean this is the currency of the book and something I'm sort of ringing the alarm bells against. And there was a kind of symbiotic relationship between everything that I've experienced and everything that was happening in that crowd.

GOODMAN: What has been the response of your newspaper, The New York Times?

HEDGES: Well, they're looking into whether I breached the protocol in terms of my very pointed statements about the Iraqi War. I mean, that's something that makes them uncomfortable. I don't think they have a problem with the book, because the book talks more generically about what war does to societies although it certainly does mention what it has done to us since 9/11. So that's something that they're looking at.

GOODMAN: What pressures do you face? The New York Times, in their reporting of the invasion, like many other papers you don't have to single them out, including television news, are very much beating the drums for war. You take a very different stance.

HEDGES: Well up until now, I haven't faced any pressure at all and I have spoken before. But because of the anger that this talk elicited, I think there's been more attention to the kinds of things that I've said. So one of the pressures I face is the proliferation of hate phone calls and hate emails. Which I had had periodically, but of course now I have daily.

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GOODMAN: We'll continue to follow what happens in this. The right-wing media has certainly picked this up.

HEDGES: Right.

GOODMAN: What's happening? Are you getting a lot of calls?

Yeah, well I don't do trash talk radio. I didn't before and I'm not going to start now. And since I don't own a television I'm spared being inflicted with this stuff.

GOODMAN: And you've written a new book?

HEDGES: Yes I have. It's called "What Every Person Should Know About War." It's really in some ways geared towards those 17- and 18-year-old kids who believe the myth of war. I think both books are an attempt to demythologize war and explain war as it is. The army has studies at length what war does to individuals, how to create more efficient killers and it goes through and answers a lot of those questions, that if they get asked, often don't get answered. #



'We have forfeited the good will that the world felt for us'

Text of the Rockford College graduation speech

By Chris Hedges

I want to speak to you today about war and empire.

Killing, or at least the worst of it, is over in Iraq. Although blood will continue to spill – theirs and ours – be prepared for this. For we are embarking on an occupation that, if history is any guide, will be as damaging to our souls as it will be to our prestige, power, and security. But this will come later as our empire expands and in all this we become pariahs, tyrants to others weaker than ourselves. Isolation always impairs judgment and we are very isolated now.

We have forfeited the good will, the empathy that the world felt for us after 9-11. We have folded in on ourselves, we have severely weakened the delicate international coalitions and alliances that are vital in maintaining and promoting peace and we are part now of a dubious troika in the war against terror with Vladimir Putin and Ariel Sharon, two leaders who do not shrink in Palestine or Chechnya from carrying out acts of gratuitous and senseless acts of violence. We have become the company we keep.

The censure and perhaps the rage of much of the world, certainly one-fifth of the world's

population which is Muslim, most of whom I'll remind you are not Arab, is upon us. Look today at the 14 people killed last night in several explosions in Casablanca. And this rage in a world where almost 50 percent of the planet struggles on less than two dollars a day will see us targeted. Terrorism will become a way of life, and when we are attacked we will, like our allies Putin and Sharon, lash out with greater fury. The circle of violence is a death spiral; no one escapes. We are spinning at a speed that we may not be able to hold. As we revel in our military prowess – the sophistication of our military hardware and technology, for this is what most of the press coverage consisted of in Iraq – we lose sight of the fact that just because we have the capacity to wage war it does not give us the right to wage war. This capacity has doomed empires in the past.

“Modern western civilization may perish,” the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr warned, “because it falsely worshiped technology as a final good.”

The real injustices, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, the brutal and corrupt dictatorships we fund in the Middle East, will mean that we will not rid the extremists who hate us with bombs. Indeed

we will swell their ranks. Once you master people by force you depend on force for con-



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trol. In your isolation you begin to make mistakes.

Fear engenders cruelty; cruelty, fear, insanity, and then paralysis. In the center of Dante's circle the damned remained motionless. We have blundered into a nation we know little about and are caught between bitter rivalries and competing ethnic groups and leaders we do not understand. We are trying to transplant a modern system of politics invented in Europe characterized, among other things, by the division of earth into independent secular states based on national citizenship in a land where the belief in a secular civil government is an alien creed. Iraq was a cesspool for the British when they occupied it in 1917; it will be a cesspool for us as well. The curfews, the armed clashes with angry crowds that leave scores of Iraqi dead, the military governor, the Christian Evangelical groups who are being allowed to follow on the heels of our occupying troops to try and teach Muslims about Jesus.

The occupation of the oil fields, the notion of the Kurds and the Shiites will listen to the demands of a centralized government in Baghdad, the same Kurds and Shiites who died by the tens of thousands in defiance of Saddam Hussein, a man who happily butchered all of those who challenged him, and this ethnic rivalry has not gone away. The looting of Baghdad, or let me say the looting of Baghdad with the exception of the oil ministry and the interior ministry – the only two ministries we bothered protecting – is self immolation.

As someone who knows Iraq, speaks Arabic, and spent seven years in the Middle East, if the Iraqis believe rightly or wrongly that we come only for oil and occupation, that will begin a long bloody war of attrition; it is how they drove the British out and remember that, when the Israelis invaded southern Lebanon in 1982, they were greeted by the dispossessed Shiites as liberators. But within a few months, when the Shiites saw that the

"This is a war of liberation in Iraq, but it is a war now of liberation by Iraqis from American occupation. And if you watch closely what is happening in Iraq, if you can see it through the abysmal coverage, you can see it in the lashing out of the terrorist death squads, the murder of Shiite leaders in mosques, and the assassination of our young soldiers in the streets"

Israelis had come not as liberators but occupiers, they began to kill them. It was Israel who created Hezbollah and was Hezbollah that pushed Israel out of Southern Lebanon.

As William Butler Yeats wrote in "Meditations in Times Of Civil War," "We had fed the heart on fantasies / the hearts grown brutal from the fair."

This is a war of liberation in Iraq, but it is a war now of liberation by Iraqis from American occupation. And if you watch closely what is happening in Iraq, if you can see it through the abysmal coverage, you can see it in the lashing out of the terrorist death squads, the murder of Shiite leaders in mosques, and the assassination of our young soldiers in the streets. It is one that will soon be joined by Islamic radicals and we are far less secure today than we were before we bumbled into Iraq.

We will pay for this, but what saddens me most is that those who will by and large pay the highest price are poor kids from Mississippi or Alabama or Texas who could not get a decent job or health insurance and joined the army because it was all we offered them. For war in the end is always about betrayal, betrayal of the young by the old, of soldiers by politicians, and of idealists by cynics. Read

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Antigone, when the king imposes his will without listening to those he rules or Thucydides' history. Read how Athens' expanding empire saw it become a tyrant abroad and then a tyrant at home. How the tyranny the Athenian leadership imposed on others it finally imposed on itself.

This, Thucydides wrote, is what doomed Athenian democracy; Athens destroyed itself. For the instrument of empire is war and war is a poison, a poison which at times we must ingest just as a cancer patient must ingest a poison to survive. But if we do not understand the poison of war – if we do not understand how deadly that poison is – it can kill us just as surely as the disease.

We have lost touch with the essence of war. Following our defeat in Vietnam we became a better nation. We were humbled, even humiliated. We asked questions about ourselves we had not asked before. We were forced to see ourselves as others saw us and the sight was not always a pretty one. We were forced to confront our own capacity for a atrocity – for evil – and in this we understood not only war but more about ourselves. But that humility is gone.

War, we have come to believe, is a spectator sport. The military and the press – remember in wartime the press is always part of the problem – have turned war into a vast video arcade game. Its very essence – death – is hidden from public view.

There was no more candor in the Persian Gulf War or the War in Afghanistan or the War in Iraq than there was in Vietnam. But in the age of live feeds and satellite television, the state and the military have perfected the appearance of candor. Because we no longer understand war, we no longer understand that it can all go horribly wrong. We no longer understand that war begins by calling for the annihilation of others but ends if we do not know when to make or maintain peace with self-annihilation. We

flirt, given the potency of modern weapons, with our own destruction.

The seduction of war is insidious because so much of what we are told about it is true – it does create a feeling of comradeship which obliterates our alienation and makes us, for perhaps the only time of our life, feel we belong.

War allows us to rise above our small stations in life; we find nobility in a cause and feelings of selflessness and even bliss. And at a time of soaring deficits and financial scandals and the very deterioration of our domestic fabric, war is a fine diversion. War for those who enter into combat has a dark beauty, filled with the monstrous and the grotesque. The Bible calls it the lust of the eye and warns believers against it. War gives us a distorted sense of self; it gives us meaning.

Once in war, the conflict obliterates the past and the future all is one heady intoxicating present. You feel every heartbeat in war, colors are brighter, your mind races ahead of itself. We feel in wartime comradeship. We confuse this with friendship, with love. There are those who will insist that the comradeship of war is love – the exotic glow that makes us in war feel as one people, one entity, is real, but this is part of war's intoxication.

Think back on the days after the attacks on 9-11. Suddenly we no longer felt alone; we connected with strangers, even with people we did not like. We felt we belonged, that we were somehow wrapped in the embrace of the nation, the community; in short, we no longer felt alienated.

As this feeling dissipated in the weeks after the attack, there was a kind of nostalgia for its warm glow and wartime always brings with it this comradeship, which is the opposite of friendship. Friends are predetermined; friendship takes place between

men and women who possess an intellectual and emotional affinity for each other. But

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comradeship – that ecstatic bliss that comes with belonging to the crowd in wartime – is within our reach. We can all have comrades.

The danger of the external threat that comes when we have an enemy does not create friendship; it creates comradeship. And those in wartime are deceived about what they are undergoing. And this is why once the threat is over, once war ends, comrades again become strangers to us. This is why after war we fall into despair.

In friendship there is a deepening of our sense of self. We become, through the friend, more aware of who we are and what we are about; we find ourselves in the eyes of the friend. Friends probe and question and challenge each other to make each of us more complete; with comradeship, the kind that comes to us in patriotic fervor, there is a suppression of self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-possession. Comrades lose their identities in wartime for the collective rush of a common cause – a common purpose. In comradeship there are no demands on the self. This is part of its appeal and one of the reasons we miss it and seek to recreate it. Comradeship allows us to escape the demands on the self that is part of friendship.

In wartime when we feel threatened, we no longer

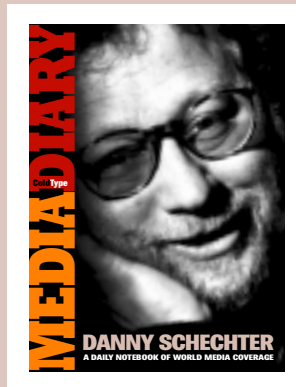
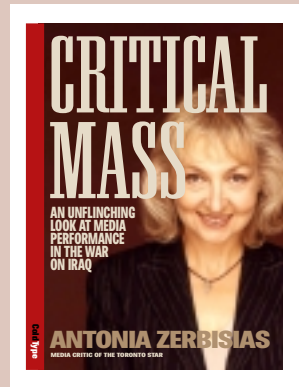
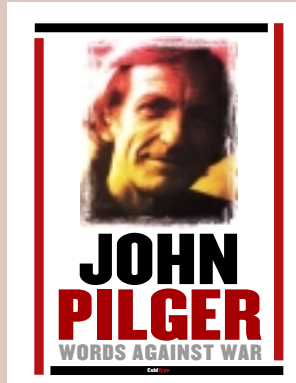
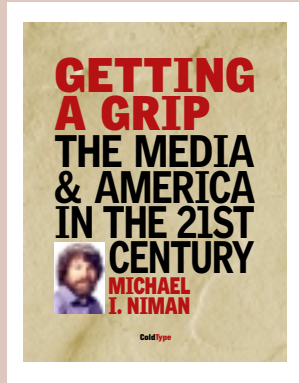
"We have lost touch with the essence of war. Following our defeat in Vietnam we became a better nation. We were humbled, even humiliated . . . We were forced to see ourselves as others saw us and the sight was not always a pretty one. We were forced to confront our own capacity for a atrocity and in this we understood not only war but more about ourselves. But that humility is gone"

face death alone but as a group, and this makes death easier to bear. We ennoble self-sacrifice for the other, for the comrade; in short we begin to worship death. And this is what the god of war demands of us.

Think finally of what it means to die for a friend. It is deliberate and painful; there is no ecstasy. For friends, dying is hard and bitter. The dialogue they have and cherish will perhaps never be recreated. Friends do not, the way comrades do, love death and sacrifice. To friends, the prospect of death is frightening. And this is why friendship or, let me say love, is the most potent enemy of war. Thank you. #



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