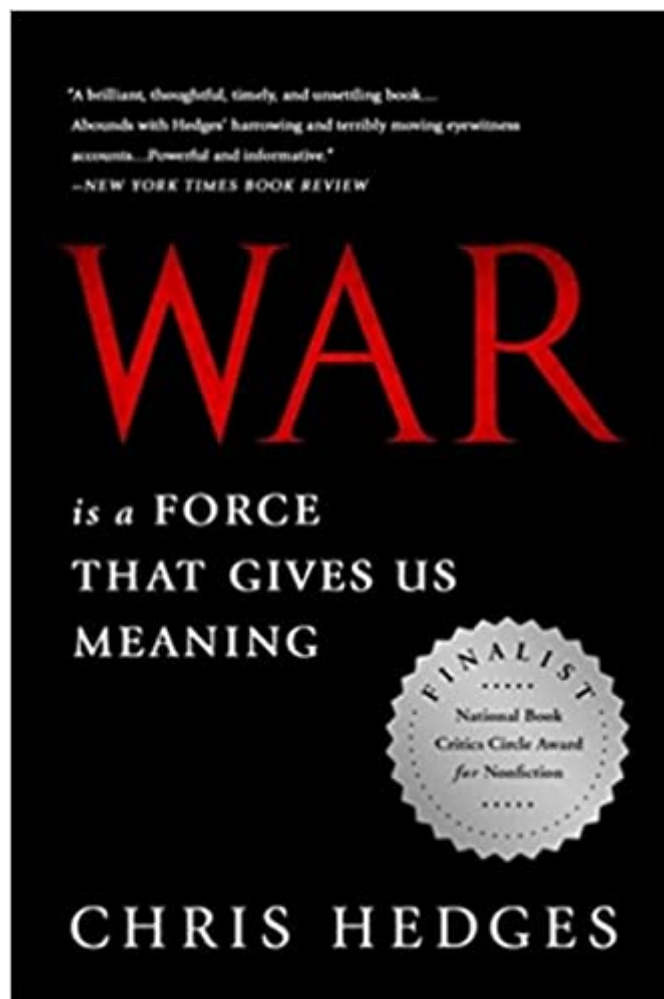


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War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning



Synopsis

As a veteran war correspondent, Chris Hedges has survived ambushes in Central America, imprisonment in Sudan, and a beating by Saudi military police. He has seen children murdered for sport in Gaza and petty thugs elevated into war heroes in the Balkans. Hedges, who is also a former divinity student, has seen war at its worst and knows too well that to those who pass through it, war can be exhilarating and even addictive: "It gives us purpose, meaning, a reason for living." Drawing on his own experience and on the literature of combat from Homer to Michael Herr, Hedges shows how war seduces not just those on the front lines but entire societies; corrupting politics, destroying culture, and perverting basic human desires. Mixing hard-nosed realism with profound moral and philosophical insight, *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* is a work of terrible power and redemptive clarity whose truths have never been more necessary.

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Customer Reviews

"The communal march against an enemy generates a warm, unfamiliar bond with our neighbors, our community, our nation, wiping out unsettling undercurrents of alienation and dislocation," writes Chris Hedges, a foreign correspondent for the New York Times. In *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, Hedges draws on his experiences covering conflicts in Bosnia, El Salvador and Israel as well as works of literature from the Iliad to Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to look at what makes war so intoxicating for soldiers, politicians and ordinary citizens. He discusses

outbreaks of nationalism, the wartime silencing of intellectuals and artists, the ways in which even a supposedly skeptical press glorifies the battlefield and other universal features of war, arguing not for pacifism but for responsibility and humility on the part of those who wage war. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

This moving book examines the continuing appeal of war to the human psyche. Veteran New York Times correspondent Hedges argues that, to many people, war provides a purpose for living; it seems to allow the individual to rise above regular life and perhaps participate in a noble cause. Having identified this myth, Hedges then explodes it by showing the brutality of modern war, using examples taken from his own experiences as a war correspondent in Latin America, the Middle East, and the Balkans. These examples highlight the devastating effects of war on life, community, and culture and its corruption of business and government. Hedges is not a pacifist, acknowledging that people need to battle evil, but he thoughtfully cautions us against accepting the accompanying myths of war. This should be required reading in this post-9/11 world as we debate the possibility of war with Iraq. For all libraries. Stephen L. Hupp, West Virginia Univ. Lib., Parkersburg Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

Judging by the title, you might think that this book speaks in favor of war. Absolutely not! In fact, it is a very powerful condemnation of war. The author had led an eventful life. He was a war correspondent who covered many conflicts in many parts of the world. He had seen his share of death, had many close calls and suffered human cruelty. This book is his attempt to understand the appeal of war. Despite universal condemnation of war (at least in principle), war has always been and still is a presence in human affairs. It continues to fascinate us and even attracts us. Why? If war is so wicked, why does it persist? Sure, there are some psychopaths out there who like war because it gives them a chance to indulge their darkest desires and achieve power, but the blame cannot be solely laid at the feet of few madmen. The sad fact is that war really does have its attractive qualities. "Truth is the first casualty of war," as the saying goes. That is true. The rulers need to first sell war to their people. Even the most totalitarian regimes do not start war out of the blue. Elaborate propaganda operation is first mounted to convince us that the enemy is evil, or at least in some way worse than us. People with whom we had no quarrel before suddenly become our enemy. They are portrayed as wicked and inferior. Differences, no matter how small and irrelevant, are brought up time after time as evidence of their otherness. Whatever bad things a few of them did, they are used to condemn all of them as evil. Some of these differences and bad deeds

are no doubt true, but propaganda exaggerates them and even manufactures more if what is out there is not enough. At the same time, propaganda tries to convince us that we are the good guys and superior to the enemy. In other words, we are on the side of angels and they fight for Satan. In case of religious wars, this might literally be the official position. Quite often it is not enough to say that the other side is evil and inferior. They must also pose a grave threat. After all, if they were evil and inferior, but meant us no harm, then most people would not care enough to travel over there and fight them. But if they pose a threat to us, then not only we have a right to fight them, we even have a duty to. A man has to protect his country and loved us after all. Strangely, while individuals might resist propaganda, the masses often fall for it. There is powerful allure in accepting the propaganda. If we believe the lies, then suddenly we become heroes fighting the good fight against forces of darkness. We protect our loved ones from a wicked enemy. We see friends and neighbors support a cause and we feel the pull to join them to gain a sense of belonging. The psychological need to fit with a group and to be accepted is a powerful human desire. For those who are directly exposed to combat, aside for the horror and fear there is also excitement. The fight or flight response kicks in and our bodies are flooded with adrenaline. Even fear has its exciting properties. How else do you explain people enjoying horror movies? Soldiers experience intense comradeship and are often and are held as heroes. It is hard to be exposed to this kind of adoration and not have your ego flattered. Civilians feel a bond with their fellow civilians if their side is winning. If their side is losing and they are exposed to violence, this bond grows even stronger as they must together endure hardship and death. War has its dark attractiveness, but it is also a lie. It is like heroin. It makes you feel fantastic when you are under its influence, but at the same time it is destroying you. Eventually it will leave you a pathetic, sad shadow of what you were, and then it will kill you. War inverts values. What was once good is now bad and vice versa. Showing kindness and protecting human lives is generally speaking considered as a virtue. But in war showing kindness and protecting the lives of the people on the other side is almost a crime. War dissenters (who are essentially people who say that you should not hurt fellow human beings and look for peaceful solutions) are vilified and called traitors. They might be charged with crimes, imprisoned and even killed. On the other hand, people who kill, maim and hurt the enemy and destroy their property are made to look heroic. What before was rightfully called mass murder and criminality, now is the desired behavior. When the war is over, when the lies are exposed, silence and fantasy reign supreme. As people realize the evil and foolishness in which they indulged, they become ashamed and prefer to keep quiet about it. Not only people don't want to talk about it, they prefer not to hear about it. When some few brave individuals speak out, they are ignored. When there is no way to

hide the truth, the evil is excused. Atrocities committed by our own side are written off as ugly necessities of war or laid at the feet of few "bad apples". And it is quickly pointed out that the enemy committed atrocities too. Apparently, their evil justifies our evil. But the silence is not enough. The society is faced with a problem. The old lies don't work anymore, but the truth is too painful to face. So new lies are invented. People replace old fantasy with new fantasy. Generals might say that they lost the war because politicians stabbed them in the back. Politicians might say that it was the country's allies who stabbed them in the back. Or the other side had won because they "cheated". (As if war was a sport with set rules.) This new fantasy prevents healing on both sides, thus sowing the seeds for the next conflict. While the current generation might have learned its lessons, those lessons are not passed down to the new generation. New generations grow up believing the fantasies, and one day they will march to war. This is, grossly, the author's thesis, although sometimes he does not lay it out as clearly. The book is written purely from heart and emotion. The impression from the text I got is that this is an emotional outburst and purging of a troubled soul. This is fine by me. It makes the book only more powerful. I have read some anti-war books in the past, but never anything so powerful. I have only one complaint. The author grimly states that in his opinion there will always be war (I agree) and that sometimes wars are necessary. But he does not elaborate on what he would consider a justifiable war. Taking into account how strongly anti-war his book is, it would be interesting to know in what circumstances he would approve of war.

Hedges' professes his book is not a polemic against war, but if it isn't that, then it's nothing; and *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* is something. It's the strongest polemic against war that I have read. Hedges is particularly adept at describing how the various national myths of war work on the cumulative thinking of a population and deludes them into the righteousness of their cause. War gives an illusion of purpose, meaning, a reason for living, all dispelled quickly enough. While Hedges focuses on myths, the similarities are so similar that there is essentially one myth at the core. Its variance from country to country, and war to war is not as significant as some might think. He also draws extensively on the literature around war, from the *Illiad* - spelling out the qualities needed by a soldier going into battle - and the *Odyssey* - the obverse qualities required of those returning from armed conflict - to more modern texts such as Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*. At times the text is repetitive, which is not a major problem over 185 pages. His invocation of Freud while analyzing the myths of Eros and Thanatos did not resonate with me. I think his text would benefit from excising Herr Freud's observations.

Chris Hedges gives us a view and insight to war that is important for all to understand. Before reading the book, I was already against the next war, whatever it might be. War is always a tragedy, and a very expensive one. But how can you really understand it? The news tends to focus on the statistics, the strategy, and "if it bleeds it leads." Hedges makes it personal. It first I was intrigued by how someone might be addicted to war. The gritty edge of life -- and romance -- with the thrill that this moment might be your last. That is beguiling, but Hedges does so much more with this book.

Chapter 1. We all KNOW that the media distort things -- but it is not just the media. The people at war change their thinking. This is interesting: Croats, Muslims, and Serbs in that region spoke the same language and were virtually indistinguishable, suddenly found deep lines between them to fight over. With only a few words different between them, the use of those few words became rallying points to fight over. The myth that they were distinct and separate peoples HAD to be realized one way or another. Hedges documents many examples of how peoples were compatible before the war, during the war insurmountable differences, and went back to compatible after the war. War changes the way people think.

Chapter 2. Nationalism. "Lurking beneath the surface of every society, even ours, is the passionate yearning for a nationalist cause that exhorts us, the kind that war alone is able to deliver." Nationalism not only paints a collective view of war that is unrealistic, it thrills the public. These national myths are largely benign during peace, but during wartime cause a collective amnesia. Even scholars are not immune to this amnesia.

Chapter 3. Destruction of culture. This is something the state does to itself. It is a kind of cleansing of anything that might not be lock-step with the priorities of war. Art or any authentic culture becomes seen as subversive. Only through this cleansing can the enemy be truly dehumanized. Symbols that stand against the agitprop are selected for aggression, like the ottoman bridge in Mostar Bosnia, or the Moorish-revival library in Sarajevo. These acts solidify the narrative.

Chapter 4. Seduction of Battle. Where would hollywood be without all those WWII movies about glory on the battlefield. He documents wrenching stories of palestinian boys personally driven to join in to throw rocks, knowing they will be shot in return, irresistibly drawn to the glory of doing battle, even if hopeless. As a journalist, Hedges makes it clear that the result is just a futile bloody corpse. The leaders do not have to twist the arms of the soldiers to get them to join. If anything, it is the opposite. The glory of battle is too attractive. But the reality is that war corrupts nearly everything. People do things they can never admit they did.

Chapter 5. Memory. The atrocities of war are quickly forgotten. After all, who would want to remember them clearly anyway? More important that, the way the world was before the war is often quickly covered up and forgotten by the victors. Those who carry out the war can not afford to have the myths and glory punctured by inconvenient facts.

Chapter 6. The Cause.

Justifying war. Chapter 7. Eros and Thanatos. After all the descriptions of effects on culture and people, we circle back to the effects in the individual. The culture of death. The fatal attraction of reporters. Casualties of war. PTSD. Hedges gives an unfiltered picture of war-torn people. It is not a happy book. At times you will feel happy just to have finished it. Yet it remains very thought-provoking. Don't talk about war without having read this book. Hedges brings it all together. So many people go to war, and then say they can't write about it. It doesn't make sense out of context. Etc. Chris Hedges succeeded in writing about it, and well he wrote.

This is a must-read for people who are interested in history, military history and politics. Chris Hedges, through his autobiographical book, talks about war in ways that you cannot easily find in other books, and that at the end really make you think about war and the human involvement in violence. This is a hard book, and must be read with an open mind. It is not a book that military institutions will put on their reading lists, but it might be an interesting read for soldiers and officers.

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