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Book Review **by Richard M. Ebeling**

War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning by Chris Hedges
(New York: Public Affairs, 2002); 211 pages; \$23.

During the Second World War, my mother worked for the Department of the Navy in Washington, D.C. When I was growing up, she would sometimes look back at those war years with a great degree of nostalgia. She would say that in spite of how terrible war could be, those years brought people together; there was a sense of shared purpose. Everyone knew what he was fighting for and everybody knew that he had to do his part.

The same sentiment was expressed by some after the First World War. What the world needed, it was said, was a moral equivalent to war. War may be destructive and cruel, but the citizens — both on the battlefield and at home — possessed a hierarchy of common values under which the public interest was placed ahead of the personal and private desires of separate individuals. If only in peace, for constructive ends, people could agree on a similar hierarchy of shared goals and purposes for the common good! War reminded people that the group's interests should take precedence and needed to take precedence over private wants.

The appeal and pull of war on people's attitudes and actions is the theme of Chris Hedges's new book, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. For 15 years Hedges was a foreign combat correspondent for the *New York Times*, the *Dallas Morning News*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. He reported on wars and civil wars in Central America, Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkans. He was shot at, beaten up, bombed, and even brutalized in captivity. Yet he kept going back for more, year after year. He hated and was appalled by war, but at the same time found it to be the greatest emotional rush he had ever known. War repelled and fascinated him at the same time.

“The enduring attraction of war is this,” Hedges states:

Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives become apparent.... War makes the world understandable, a black and white tableau of them and us. It suspends thought, especially self-critical thought. All bow before the supreme effort. We are one.

Truth and war

The first and leading casualty in war, Hedges explains, is the truth. In war, doubts and hesitations about the justness of one’s country’s cause are not permitted. The facts of the causes behind the war and the events during it are passed through a sieve that extracts anything that would be critical of “our side” and paints everything done by the “other side” as vile, evil, and cruel.

We are “right” and they are “wrong.” Who fosters this myth of the “good” and the “bad”? Both the state and the news media, Hedges insists. “Mythic war reporting sells papers and boosts ratings,” he argues. “Such docility on the part of the press made it easier [during the Persian Gulf War and in the war in Afghanistan] to do what governments do in wartime, and indeed what governments do much of the time, and that is lie.” War myths eliminate doubts and create the illusion of a clear and causal chain of events that “proves” the nobility of “our” cause and the “corruption” of “theirs.”

Such myths are important, Hedges also reasons, because most of the time wars are about power and plunder. And it is difficult to get masses of people to follow leaders and fight and die for them if the truth of the emperor’s nakedness is open and obvious for all to see. Hedges’s reporting on conflicts throughout the world has convinced him that in the vast majority of cases those who push for war and serve as the leaders in war are thugs and thieves who rise from petty crime to national “heroism” through the creation and rationales of such war myths. Besides, Hedges points out, “There are always people willing to commit unspeakable human atrocity in exchange for a little power and privilege.”

Nationalism and culture

One of the worst of these myths, he argues, is what he calls “the plague of nationalism.” Nationalism divides human beings on the basis of language, religion, ethnicity, or culture. It fosters beliefs of superiority and victimhood. Other human beings, who in more peaceful times

may have been one's neighbors, friends, and even relatives are transformed into alien subhumans not deserving of respect, tolerance, or even basic existence. Death is too good for those belonging to the opposing national group. It is not enough to kill them. Their bodies must be mutilated; their homes must be destroyed and wiped off the face of the earth; their graves must be desecrated.

Even when wars end and peace returns, the nationalist impulses are not removed; they merely remain dormant waiting to be brought back to life. "While the excesses carried out in the name of nationalist causes are forgotten or ignored, the myth of the nation has a disturbing longevity," Hedges warns. "It lies dormant, festering in the society, nurtured by boys' adventure stories of heroism in service to the nation, the monuments we erect to the fallen, and carefully scripted remembrances until it slowly slouches back into respectability."

Another victim of war is culture, Hedges says. Culture represents the cumulative artistic, philosophical, religious, social, and intellectual accomplishments of a people and a society. Culture requires openness to argument and debate if it is to grow and improve. Cultures evolve through criticism, by challenges to the established and currently accepted. War, on the other hand, takes culture and applies it for its own purposes. He explains:

National symbols — flags, patriotic songs, sentimental dedications — invade and take over cultural space. Art becomes infected with the platitudes of patriotism. More important, the use of a nation's cultural resources to back up the war effort is essential to mask the contradictions and lies that mount over time in the drive to sustain war. Culture and national symbols that do not support the crusade are often ruthlessly removed.... Clichés, coined by the state, become the only acceptable vocabulary. Everyone knows what to say and how to respond. It is scripted. Vocabulary shrinks so that the tyranny of nationalist rhetoric leaves people sputtering state-sanctioned slogans.... War, just as it tears down old monuments, demands new ones. These new monuments glorify the state's uniform and unwavering call for self-sacrifice and ultimately self-annihilation.... The state spends tremendous time protecting, explaining, and promoting the cause.... The enterprise of the state becomes imbued with a religious aura.... And because we in modern society have walked away from institutions that stand outside the state to find moral guidance and spiritual direction, we turn to the state in times of war. The state and the institutions of state become, for many, the center of worship in wartime.

The way out

How then do we free ourselves from the appeal of war and its dangerous and destructive myths? Chris Hedges earned a master's degree in theology from Harvard University. And while he does not in any way wear his beliefs on his sleeve in the book, it is clear that he considers religion as

the ultimate answer to war and its consequences. Individual acts of charity and kindness, of basic humanity, even in the midst of the whirlwind of war's carnage, have clearly convinced him that the ultimate answer to war is love.

Love is a noble and moving sentiment in man, but by itself it provides no solution to the dilemma of war and human conflict. It does not provide a political-economic philosophy for society and human relationships in it. In the great classical-liberal epoch of the 19th century, many of the leading advocates of peace and freedom were devout Christians — Frédéric Bastiat and Richard Cobden, for example. But they understood that their Christian belief in the uniqueness and sanctity of human life and a tolerance and respect for the individual and his conscience required a complementary social philosophy.

For them this required an understanding of the morality of the free-market society. Private property was necessary to protect individuals from arbitrary abuse and manipulation by political power. A rule of law, impartially administered and enforced for all, was necessary to eliminate the danger of privilege and favoritism. Voluntary exchange and contract were essential for abolishing the use of force or its threat from human relationships, both private and political. And the clear recognition and respect for individual rights was fundamental to prevent and preclude categorizing and classifying of people into tribal and collectivist groupings to which individual human beings then would be made subordinate.

Only such a political-economic philosophy of man and society can reduce and possibly even eliminate the causes and the occurrence of war. Without it, man will be condemned to unending conflicts both within and between nations and peoples. And the myths of war will continue to rule over man.

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