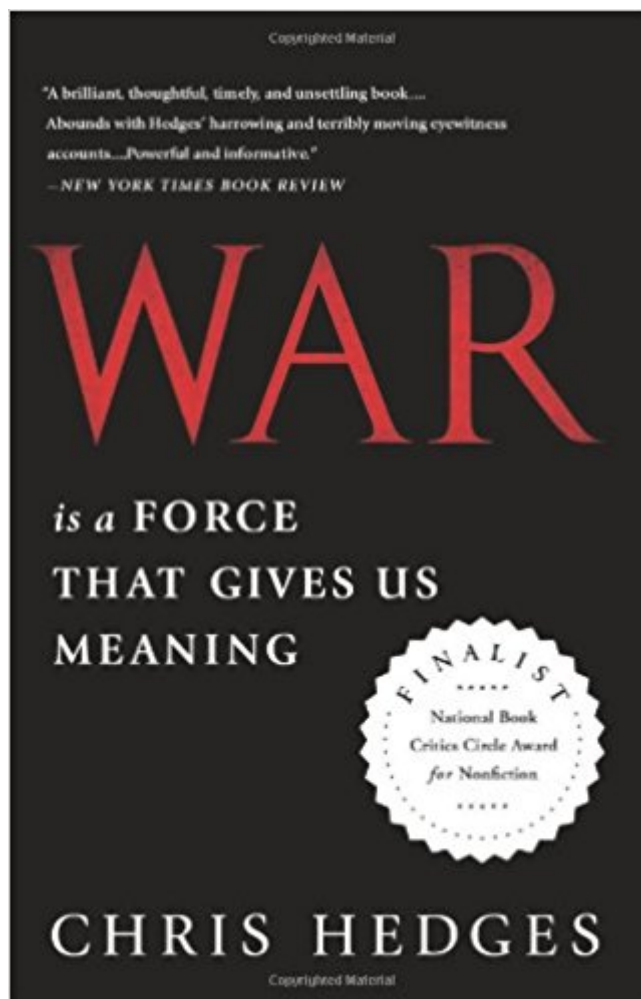


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War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning



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

Chris Hedges has written a deeply thoughtful and thought provoking book on the insanity of war. Myths and identified are exploded. Realities are presented, at times, in graphic detail. Yet the book is an odd duck in some ways. Despite references to and quotations from the classics of literature, it is not an academic work; but neither is it a journalistic work. It is largely introspective; and in this sense, reminds me of the work of Joan Didion. The title offends me as it asserts a truth I wish to deny. Yet, as combat veteran, having looked closely at the dead--of my brothers and of those we

killed--having stared into vacant eyes looking off to some unseen horizon, I cannot deny the truth he asserts: War is a Force that gives us meaning. Fortunately, it is not the ONLY force, and needs not be THE force, as he makes clear toward the end. Indeed, a subtitle could be "Love is THE force which gives us true meaning. I find the reviews of some of Hedges' critics rather amusing, and strongly suspect they have never worn the uniform, much less served in combat. If they did, they would realize some of their criticisms are, well, stupid. This book, for example, is not anti-patriotic, though neither is it "patriotic", at least not in any usual sense of the word. Hedges' argument is our loyalties should not lie, at least not exclusively, not decisively, with any nation or government. Our patriotism should not be blind, nor should it be a means of manipulation. Rather, it should be grounded in love and understanding. Though Hedges does not say this specifically, I think he would agree that true patriotism entails both love of country AND love of humanity.

Everything about Chris Hedges's book, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, is disturbing. The vivid eyewitness accounts of war crimes, the rambling disjointed highly personal style that mirrors the chaos of battle, the link between brutality and sexuality, the use of historical literature that obliterates the distance mankind has traveled from Troy to Kosovo, and his own deep addiction to the thrill of war as a long time war correspondent. Even the dust cover of the book was intended to be disturbing. The full color picture shows a multinational group of women and men with their arms raised and holding the hands of the person next to them. It is evening, but their faces, and the America flags they hold, are illuminated by candles. They are not angry. Indeed, they might be praying or singing, but clearly they rally to some significant and somber cause. In the background are the lighted skyscrapers of a large city. No doubt this city is New York and these people are responding to the events of September 11. This is one way the mythology of war constructs symbols of meaning and imbues us with its purpose. President George W. Bush's Afghanistan war had the broad support of the American people. Hedges likens war to an addiction, the high of which is all-consuming. A sustained superbowl weekend of tribal bonding, adrenaline rushes, sex, and violence. A place stalked by the losers of peacetime-petty thieves and thugs who understand domination as a matter of force and terror. War, Hedges concludes, forms a central part of the human condition. He notes that "the historian Will Durant calculated that there have only been twenty-nine years in all of human history during which a war was not underway somewhere." From a historical sweep humans have never stopped fighting.

Chris Hedges was a war correspondent for many years, covering the various wars and insurgencies

in Central America, North Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans. This book is not so much a memoir (although Hedges draws deeply on his own experience) as it is a meditation on the effects of war and of the nationalist myths that often provide a basis for war -- how easy it is to be caught up by the myth of the hero, of noble sacrifice, of the utter depravity (inhumanity) of the enemy (the Other), and how difficult it is to recover from the inevitable disillusionment when the terror of war, the collapse of morality and the essential humanity of the Other is revealed. Hedges is at his best in discussing the aftermath of war -- the collective forgetting as history and memory are erased, lest the survivors be forced to face what they have done. Yet it is only by recovering the truth, acknowledging guilt and seeking reconciliation that society can begin to heal and move forward. Hedges' message is an important one as we rush headlong into war, particularly for all who demonize the "axis of evil" without acknowledging the role we have played in creating the despair and rage that have turned men and women into terrorists. As Hedges shows, it is difficult for non-combatants to resist the national myth, to penetrate behind the approved rhetoric, to waver from the absolute, unquestioning patriotism demanded by the state. But some must do so if we are to keep our moral compass and begin to heal the world (i.e., to address the despair felt by both sides). Although the message is strong, there are a few weaknesses in this book.

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