

Seduced by war

by [Charles Kimball](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning.

By Chris Hedges. Public Affairs, 211 pp., \$23.00; paperback, \$12.95.

Chris Hedges's penetrating insights into war are as current as the daily headlines. The images of the war in Iraq and the proclamations of political, military and religious leaders vividly etched in our minds make Hedges's analyses all the more compelling.

Hedges knows the Middle East well, having served both as the Jerusalem bureau chief of the *Dallas Morning News* in the 1980s and as a correspondent for the New York Times during the 1991 gulf war. This book draws heavily on the knowledge and experience he gleaned from years of firsthand experience in Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Cyprus, Algeria, Iran and Iraq. But the Middle East provides only part of the backdrop against which he writes. His 20 years as a war correspondent also have taken him to the Falkland Islands, El Salvador, the former Yugoslavia, Guatemala, Nicaragua and northern India.

The book's richness and depth are enhanced by Hedges's theological and literary sophistication. The son of a parish minister, Hedges has a degree in English literature, an M.Div. from Harvard Divinity School and a devotion to classical literature. Regular readers of the *New York Times* already know that he is a very gifted writer.

His book's title partially obscures Hedges's critique of war. He explains the title in this way: "The enduring attraction to war is this: 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 becomes apparent. Trivia dominates our conversations and increasingly our airwaves. And war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble."

Hedges describes his and other journalists' attraction to war as an addiction. With relentless honesty, he recounts how he was drawn into war zones time and again, always seeking out the stories to be found in the midst of battle. He rejected the spoon-fed approach offered to the press pool during Desert Storm, instead launching out on his own to put a human face on the war. With a few others he was captured and imprisoned for several weeks by the Iraqis.

Hedges's chapters are laced with vivid stories of brutality masquerading as heroism, political and religious manipulation and wrenching personal tragedies. By drawing on experiences in multiple contemporary settings, he challenges mythologies routinely espoused by leaders and propagated by the media. The patterns are consistent and striking: the enemy is dehumanized as the universe is starkly divided between the forces of light and the forces of darkness; people are morally certain that their cause is "just"; national symbols (flags, patriotic songs and sentimental dedications) take over cultural space; people who challenge or deny the nationalist agenda are reviled or shunned; and, "docility on the part of the media makes it easier for governments to do in wartime what they do much of the time, and that is lie."

Reflections on the seduction of battle penetrate the allure of heroism. Hedges observes that wars usually start with a collective euphoria, as soldiers join the great enterprise amidst high-blown rhetoric, admiring supporters, righteous indignation and an object upon which to vent their anger. The glory dissipates for most combatants when they find that the noble cause includes horrific cries of agony, the stench of rotting flesh and a perversity that demolishes normal standards of behavior.

As war "breaks down long-established prohibitions against violence, destruction and murder," the domination and brutality of the battlefield carry over into personal life. Rape, mutilation, abuse and theft are predictable outcomes in a world where force rules and human beings are treated as objects. Hedges's compelling eyewitness accounts of societal collapse and unspeakable brutality make clear why those who advocate for the next war must hijack or obscure the memory of previous wars. Most former combatants withdraw and prefer not to talk about the cruel realities of war, so starkly different from the jingoistic ideal.

Hedges's powerful book is not long, but it traverses continents and centuries. It is not difficult to read, but it is haunting and painful. Now, when many are intoxicated with the elixir that "might makes right," and our interdependent global community includes many righteous causes and many weapons of mass destruction, this book

couldn't be more timely. Clergy should read it, since Hedges provides considerable material for thoughtful sermons. Congregations should study and discuss it. Peter, Paul and Mary ask, "When will they ever learn?" Hedges reminds us that we who share this planet are that "they."