

Hecklers shout down journalist's antiwar speech at college commencement

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Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges was forced to cut short a commencement speech at a private Illinois college on May 17 after right-wing hecklers shouted him down and rushed the platform. The hooligan attack was directed against Hedges' sharp condemnation of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Hedges, who works for the *New York Times*, is a veteran war correspondent who speaks Arabic and spent a number of years in the Middle East. He is the author of the book *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, which includes a trenchant critique of both the ways in which war is promoted to the public and how it is covered by the US media.

He began his commencement address at the Rockford College graduation by announcing that he intended to speak about "war and empire," and warned his audience that, while the major fighting was over in Iraq, "blood will continue to spill—theirs and ours."

He continued: "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."

He barely was able to say more when sections of the audience responded with boos and catcalls. Some tried to shout him down, yelling, "God bless America," "Go Home," and "Send him to France."

As he continued his remarks, a few individuals rushed the stage and twice disconnected his microphone, forcing him to halt the speech. Others climbed onto the platform. Afterwards, Hedges described the situation as threatening.

At one point, the journalist turned to the Rockford College president, Paul Pribbenow, and asked whether he should continue. Pribbenow himself took the microphone to deliver a few remarks about the importance of "academic freedom" and Hedges's right to "offer his opinion." While this intervention was greeted with cheers from some in the audience, after he sat down the heckling continued, accompanied by boos, shouts, and the blasting of fog horns.

In the end, Pribbenow suggested that Hedges cut short his speech, which he did. The journalist was then escorted off the campus by security guards out of fear for his safety.

Despite the efforts to silence him, Hedges delivered a powerful denunciation of US militarism. Criticizing media coverage of the war in Iraq for its focus on America's military might, Hedges said 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."

"Iraq was a cesspool for the British when they occupied it in 1917; it will be a cesspool for us as well," said Hedges. "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 US will face a "long, bloody war of attrition" in Iraq, he warned. He added: "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.” Warning that the American people will pay a serious price for the war, Hedges added, “...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.”

Hinting at the political motives of the Bush administration in promoting a policy of military aggression, he said that “at a time of soaring deficits and financial scandals and the very deterioration of our domestic fabric, war is a fine diversion.”

Rockford College declares in its promotional material that its vision is “to be Jane Addams College in the 21st century.” Addams, who graduated from the college in 1881, was the founder of Hull House and the settlement house movement that sought to provide social services in the impoverished American slums. A pacifist, she helped found the American Union against Militarism and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Notwithstanding this humanist and liberal legacy, the reaction of the college administrators who invited Hedges to speak was one of cringing before right-wing thuggery. One can easily imagine what the response would have been had left-wing protesters or opponents of the war attempted to shout down an administration official defending the aggression against Iraq. In a number of recent incidents, people doing no more than holding signs opposing the war have been dragged away by police.

A report on the incident in the local newspaper, the *Rockford Register Star*, was headlined “Speaker Disrupts RC Graduation,” suggesting that Hedges was to blame, rather than those who shouted down and threatened him. In a telephone interview with the Rockford paper, Hedges said he was shocked by the intimidation tactics. “How can you expect to have anyone climb on stage and turn your mike off?” he said. “Watching it in my own country is heartbreaking.”

The Associated Press, quoting a spokeswoman for the *New York Times*, said that the newspaper was “looking

into the matter,” but noted that the *Times* had declined to spell out the nature of its concern over the incident. In an interview Wednesday on the listener-sponsored radio and television program “Democracy Now!” Hedges indicated that the newspaper was considering taking action against him for the anti-war content of his speech. He told the interviewer, Amy Goodman, that the *Times* was “looking into whether I breached the protocol in terms of my very pointed statements about the Iraqi War.”

To date the *Times* has made no editorial comment about the attack on one of its most prominent reporters.

The full text of Hedges’s speech is available at http://www.rrstar.com/localnews/your_community/rockford/0521hedgesspeech.shtml



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