

Chris Hedges' dishonest defense of the January 6 fascist mob

David North, Jacob Crosse
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On March 5, under the headline “Lynching the Deplorables,” journalist Chris Hedges published a column on his Substack blog opposing the prosecution of participants in the right-wing mob attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, as part of former President Donald Trump’s failed coup attempt.

The column endorses the fascist narrative of the January 6 attack as a harmless protest of frustrated and disenfranchised citizens. It covers up the political significance of the events of that day, the first ever attempt by a US president to overturn an election defeat and remain in power. And it grossly exaggerates the Department of Justice’s reaction, presenting it as the unduly harsh and possibly illegal persecution of innocent demonstrators, rather than as a limited and reluctant response to an unsuccessful attempt at a coup d’etat.

Hedges’ column turns political reality on its head, transforming participants in a fascist political putsch, who sought to establish a presidential dictatorship, into martyrs whose prosecution is a gross assault on democratic rights.

It is one thing for socialists to warn, as the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site* frequently have done, that the working class cannot rely on the capitalist state to suppress the fascists; and that whatever repressive measures it may be legally obligated to take from time to time against the right will be employed far more broadly and viciously against the left. It is another thing entirely to oppose holding fascists accountable for actual crimes of violence, to justify their actions politically, and to portray them as martyrs who must be defended.

One usual characteristic of state repression is the gross disparity between the treatment of right-wing and fascistic groups, who occasionally clash with the police, but enjoy considerable support and sympathy within its ranks, and the savage violence unleashed against the left, not only against socialists and revolutionaries, but against even those protesting for liberal reforms.

Lessons from history

There is a long history in the United States of right-wing violence not even being investigated by the capitalist state. In the civil rights era, the killers of Emmett Till and Medgar Evers went unpunished for decades. It took a sustained struggle to hold the murderers of three voting rights activists in rural Mississippi—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—to account. The same was true for the murderers of Viola Liuzzo, a Detroit housewife working as a volunteer during the march to Selma, who was shot to death by a carload of Klansmen. Among the killers was an FBI informant. The Workers League, predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, was compelled to wage a three-year campaign in the labor movement, between 1977 and 1980, to force the New York

police to arrest the two identified assassins of Trotskyist leader Tom Henehan.

During the post-World War I period of the rise of fascism in Europe, there were numerous incidents of wrist-slap punishment of its leaders even when they engaged in violent efforts to overthrow the government. In 1923, Adolf Hitler sought to overthrow the Bavarian state government in the Beer Hall Putsch in Munich. The putsch failed, but Hitler was sentenced to only a one-year term in prison, where he lived in comfort, consolidated his leadership of the extreme right in Germany, and wrote *Mein Kampf*. In the years leading up to Hitler’s accession to power in 1933, Nazi thugs who murdered communists frequently went unpunished by the Weimar regime.

The event that has the greatest similarity to the events of January 6, 2021 is the fascist attack on the French parliament on February 6, 1934, when groups of armed ex-military officers, at the head of a fascist mob, tried to overthrow the government. The police beat them back, killing 15 fascists. But one day later the center-left Daladier government fell, succeeded by a more right-wing regime, decisively shifting the trajectory of French politics and giving the fascists what they wanted.

The mob that attacked the Capitol on January 6, 2021 had an even greater chance of success, since it had the backing of the sitting president and a significant section of the military-intelligence apparatus.

As a political event, the attack on the Capitol should not be trivialized and palmed off as the spontaneous expression of frustration over the results of the election. Whatever the individual motivations of disoriented and deluded individuals who bought into the Trump narrative of the “stolen election,” the attempted coup of January 6 was the end product of a massive conspiracy orchestrated out of the White House.

This first emerged publicly in June 2020, in Trump’s response to the nationwide protests against the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. He demanded the deployment of the National Guard and threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act, declare martial law, and send in the Army. This culminated in his notorious walk through Lafayette Park, trailed by top officials, including the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in full uniform, to pose with a bible in front of a church.

Throughout the summer of 2020, Trump deployed armed federal agents in Portland, Oregon and other cities. This led to the execution-style police murder of Michael Reinoehl, who had fled Portland after shooting a fascist attacker in self-defense during a protest march.

The focus then shifted to the presidential election. Throughout the fall campaign, Trump declared that he would not accept the result of the vote if it went against him. Even his Democratic opponent Joe Biden said that his greatest fear was that Trump would refuse to vacate the White House. But Biden did nothing to prepare the voters for the post-election crisis, instead declaring his confidence that the military-intelligence apparatus would enforce the peaceful transfer of power, making it the arbiter of American political life.

Chris Hedges has chosen to ignore the pre-history of the coup. This is a calculated political decision on his part, which contradicts his own explicit warnings, prior to the presidential election in November 2020, of fascist preparations for armed violence.

In an article written for *Scheerpost*, published on September 8, 2020, Hedges warned of a growing right-wing movement, whose members

stand poised to tear apart the United States, awash in military-grade weapons, unable to cope with the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic fallout, cursed with militarized police forces that function as internal armies of occupation and de facto allies of the neofascists.

Clearly anticipating Trump's plan to overthrow the election results, Hedges continued:

Donald Trump and the Republican Party, along with media outlets such as FOX News, in a bid to retain power, are fanning the flames of violence, seeing in the incitement of far-right mobs a route to a ruthless police state.

Covering up Trump's coup attempt

In a thoroughly cynical display of calculated political amnesia, Hedges has chosen to forget his prior warnings and characterization of the forces being mobilized by Trump. In fact, there is almost no reference to Trump in the course of the entire column and nothing at all about his role on January 6. Hedges quotes defense lawyer Joseph McBride, a principal source for his column, denying any connection between the Proud Boys who spearheaded the attack on the Capitol and the instigator in the White House.

Hedges makes no mention of Trump's instruction to the Proud Boys, during a nationally televised campaign debate, to "stand back and stand by." Nor does he mention Trump's notorious public call for supporters to come to Washington on January 6, closing with the promise that it "will be wild!" Nearly every January 6 defendant has cited Trump's summons as the reason for their presence. Nor does Hedges note that the January 6 attack was immediately preceded by a rally outside the White House where Trump ordered the armed mob he had assembled with his Republican allies to march to the Capitol and "fight like hell" or else "you won't have a country anymore."

Hedges even disputes the charge of seditious conspiracy that has been brought against only a handful of ringleaders of the attack on the Capitol, while most of the thousand or so cases filed by the Justice Department against January 6 defendants involve misdemeanors or low-grade felonies carrying little or no jail time. Of the more serious charges, he writes:

While a few of the organizers of the Jan. 6 protest such as Stewart Rhodes, who founded Oath Keepers, *may* conceivably be guilty of sedition, *and even this is in doubt*, the vast majority of those caught up in the incursion of the Capitol did not commit serious crimes, engage in violence or know what they would do in Washington other than protest the election results. (emphasis added)

He ignores evidence that members of the Oath Keepers, another paramilitary group, brought guns and "suitcases full of ammunition" to Washington. He does not discuss why Trump was furious with the active use of magnetometers before his January 6 speech, preventing the armed fascists from getting too close. "I don't fucking care that they have weapons," Trump stated. "They're not here to hurt me. Take the fucking mags away."

Hedges depicts the mob of well over 1,000 people as perhaps overly rambunctious but seeking to do no more than express their legitimate frustration over the election. He never poses the question of what would have happened if those who broke through police lines into the Capitol had succeeded in their goal of capturing Vice President Mike Pence, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, or another prominent congressional figure.

There was a gallows set up outside the Capitol for a reason. It is more than likely that congressmen seized by the rioters would have been either killed or used as hostages to pressure Congress to call off the certification vote entirely and negotiate on the terms for Trump to remain in the White House.

Such a scenario was certainly in Trump's mind when he demanded that his Secret Service entourage take him to the Capitol so he could lead the mob inside to pose his challenge to the congressional certification directly. That is why he foamed at the mouth and struck his own guard when the agent refused to take him.

Are the January 6 attackers being persecuted?

Much of Hedges' column is taken up with attempts to generate sympathy for those who attacked the Capitol, exaggerating the punitive consequences they now face, and providing tear-jerking life stories for several of the most notorious defendants.

The truth is that only a select few high-level militia members and ultra-violent fascists, like ex-N.Y.P.D cop and former Marine Thomas Webster, have received multi-year prison sentences for, in his case, choking a policeman and beating him with a flagpole. The vast majority of those convicted for participating in the failed coup have faced misdemeanor or minor felony charges and received short prison terms, home confinement, or nothing beyond fines and probation.

In an update last week, the Department of Justice (DoJ) confirmed that of the "approximately 420 federal defendants" who have been sentenced for criminal activity on January 6, just under half, 200, were never incarcerated after being found guilty. Instead, "approximately 100 defendants" the DoJ wrote, "have been sentenced to a period of home detention," with only 15 of those 100 having previously been sentenced to a period of incarceration.

For those who have been sentenced to jail, their stay has been brief. A recent *Washington Post* report, analyzing the "light sentences" handed down to January 6 criminals by federal judges, found that out of 357 people sentenced at that time, 249, or 70 percent, received either a sentence of less than two months in jail (95), home detention (66) or probation (88). The same report found that only eight people at that time had been sentenced to more than five years in prison.

Even more important is the fact that the architect of the coup, ex-president Donald Trump, and his high-level accomplices in the Republican Party, the military-intelligence apparatus and the Supreme Court, have yet to face a single charge for attempting to overthrow the Constitution.

Hedges' first profile is of the so-called QAnon Shaman, Jacob Chansley, who marched through the Capitol wearing a horned helmet,

carrying a spear with an American flag, with a bizarre paint job on his face and open chest.

He says the shaman “was sentenced to more than three years in prison,” and that Chansley “is a practitioner of *ahimsa*, an ancient Indian principle of non-violence toward all living beings, [who] was not accused of assaulting anyone.”

Actually, Chansley pleaded guilty two years ago to one felony charge of obstruction after prosecutors agreed to drop multiple other charges he was facing including civil disorder, violent entry and disorderly conduct. At his sentencing hearing in November 2021, Chansley renounced QAnon and Trump and told the judge, “I have no excuse. No excuses whatsoever. My behavior is indefensible.”

Hedges says nothing about the fascistic, anti-Semitic and violent character of the QAnon ideology, which presents Trump as a liberating figure who will massacre his Democratic Party opponents and anyone else who gets in the way.

After whitewashing Chansley, Hedges moves on to convicted Texas III Percenter Guy Wesley Reffitt. Hedges lists the numerous charges for which Reffitt was convicted, then writes, “His obstruction of justice charge came from ‘threatening’ his two teenage children to prevent them from reporting him to law enforcement.”

The use of quotation marks around the word “threatening” is highly revealing. There is no dispute Reffitt threatened to murder his children for turning him in to the police for participating in the coup.

During the trial Reffitt confirmed he traveled to Washington on January 6 with a pair of flex-cuffs and a pistol. Prosecutors told the jury, which found Reffitt guilty after less than five hours of deliberations, that Reffitt intended “to use his gun and police-style flexicuffs to forcibly drag legislators out of the building and take over Congress.”

After Reffitt returned to Texas following the attack on the Capitol, his teenage son Jackson, who testified against his father at the trial, saw his father in a TV news report on January 6. At the trial, then 19-year-old Jackson testified that his father told him and his sister that if they turned him in to the police they would be “traitors” and “traitors get shot.”

Hedges’ defense of the fascist right

In the first sentence of his column, Hedges writes, “There is *little* that unites me with those who occupied the Capitol building on Jan. 6” (emphasis added). He lists their noxious views with which he presumably disagrees—“Christian nationalism, white supremacy, blind support for Trump”—but does not answer the obvious question: what is that *little*? That “little” is an unspecified political quantity.

Hedges says nothing about the central contention of the fascist right, which was the basis of the January 6 attack, that the 2020 election was stolen and Biden is an illegitimate usurper. He ignores Trump’s continuing claim that he won a “landslide” victory, his message to the attackers as they were driven back from the Capitol, and the basis of his candidacy for the presidency in 2024.

Hedges avoids such questions, focusing instead on what he presents as the heavy-handed prosecution of the attackers, whose actions he describes benignly as a “protest,” an “incursion,” or an “occupation.”

He writes:

The Jan. 6 protestors were not the first to occupy Congressional offices. Young environmental activists from the Sunrise Movement, anti-war activists from Code Pink and even congressional staffers have engaged in numerous occupations of

congressional offices and interrupted congressional hearings. What will happen to groups such as Code Pink if they occupy congressional offices with Republicans in control of the White House, the Congress and the courts? Will they be held for years in pretrial detention? Will they be given lengthy prison terms based on dubious interpretations of the law? Will they be considered domestic terrorists? Will protests and civil disobedience become impossible?

The comparison of Code Pink and environmental activists to the Proud Boys is grotesque. They are pacifists, not violent thugs. They were not armed and did not storm congressional offices, breaking windows and cracking skulls in the process. They were seeking to appeal to Congress to listen to their point of view, not shut it down to prevent the certification of a presidential election, keep the president in office, in violation of the US Constitution, and effectively establish a presidential dictatorship in America.

Even more outrageous is the comparison of the treatment of some of the more notorious January 6 attackers to the brutal state persecution of Julian Assange, the founder-editor of WikiLeaks, which has provided invaluable documentation of the crimes of US imperialism in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the world. To compare in any way Assange’s heroic actions with the violence of the fascist riff-raff on January 6, 2021 is politically obscene.

Chris Hedges knows the circumstances in which Assange has been held and the 175 years in a federal Supermax prison that he faces if extradited, and has spoken out against his persecution. What January 6 defendant faces anything comparable?

Who is Joseph McBride?

To buttress his claims of a judicial frame-up, Hedges includes a long interview with Joseph D. McBride, a lawyer representing a number of the January 6 defendants. He presents the lawyer as a champion of civil liberties and defender of the oppressed, someone who assisted Occupy Wall Street and “provided free legal advice as a law school student to those encamped in Zuccotti Park.”

He quotes McBride comparing the treatment of the January 6 defendants to the government-backed campaign against Muslims that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001: “The same thing is happening, except it’s being applied to a new group of people, primarily white Christians, Trump supporters, for now.”

These seemingly democratic sentiments are cited to conceal the fact that McBride is an all-out supporter of Trump who moves in top circles of the fascist right, serving as a counsel for Ali Alexander, one of the main organizers of the “Stop the Steal” campaign, when he testified before the January 6 Select Committee. Alexander is a close friend of Hitler-lover Nick Fuentes.

Since the failed coup, McBride has appeared on numerous ultra-right outlets, from fascist Steve Bannon’s War Room, to FOX News, Newsmax, and One America News. He has given multiple interviews to former Trump adviser Sebastian Gorka, championing the cause of the January 6 defendants. At the recent CPAC conference, McBride was on a panel with Donald Trump Jr. and Ashli Babbitt’s mother discussing the alleged “unjust” persecution of Trump’s foot-soldiers.

In a January 2023 interview with Gorka, McBride explained that he defends January 6 “political prisoners” because “I believe it is my calling ... it is my mission in life. Win, lose or draw my team and myself will be

counted amongst the people who looked communism in the face and said in the United States of America, if you are going to succeed here you are going to have to run through us. That's the only way, there is no way around it."

On December 24, 2022 McBride tweeted at Democratic House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, "[Black Lives Matter] & ANTIFA looted, burned, and rioted for hundreds of days. Packs of young People of Color still loot every day. You are enabling them & setting them up to FAIL. Your problem is not with extremism. It's [with] the White MAGA Republicans that you're exploiting for political gain."

But the foulest comment by McBride is given to Hedges himself and reproduced uncritically in his column. Hedges quotes, without objection, McBride's false assertion that Trump's persecuted "white Christians" cannot possibly get a fair trial in Washington D.C., because, according to McBride, the "bias" in the "jury pool" is "astounding." He tells Hedges, "The D.C. jury pool is poisoned beyond repair."

Hedges claims this is because there are many federal workers in the District of Columbia, the seat of the federal government, and they might regard themselves as victims of the January 6 attack. But there is a more obvious reason for racists and fascists to decry a Washington D.C. jury pool as "tainted." The city's population, from which juries are drawn, is 50 percent African American.

This makes Hedges' use of "lynching" to describe the imprisonment and sentencing of a small number of fascistic thugs both disgusting and provocative. "White Christians" whose only crime was "protesting" the 2020 election result are being "lynched" by Democrats in Washington D.C. with the assistance of pliant black juries. This is full-out pandering to the white supremacists.

Conclusion

Hedges ends his column on his knees, begging "the left" to stop the persecution of Trump's foot soldiers lest it upset the fascists. "We are hardening the ideology and rage of the far-right. We are turning those being hounded to prison into political prisoners and martyrs," he concludes.

Actually it is Hedges who has transformed the January 6 defendants into martyrs, abandoning both critical judgment and whatever political principles he once professed.

Given Hedges' reputation as a left-wing journalist who has written a book and numerous articles on the danger of American fascism, his unrestrained defense of the mob who attempted to carry out the coup of which he had previously warned will come as a shock to his many readers. "What is Hedges smoking?" will be a common reaction.

Hedges has frequently ridiculed attempts by liberals to develop a dialogue with fascists. In his 2006 book *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, Hedges wrote:

Debate with the radical Christian Right is useless. We cannot reach this movement. It does not want a dialogue. It is a movement based on emotion and cares nothing for rational thought and discussion. It is not mollified because John Kerry prays or Jimmy Carter teaches Sunday school. Naive attempts to reach out to the movement, to assure them that we, too, are Christian or we, too, care about moral values, are doomed.

This movement is bent on our destruction. The attempts by many liberals to make peace would be humorous if the stakes were not so deadly. These dominionists hate the liberal, enlightened world

formed by the Constitution, a world they blame for the debacle of their lives. They have one goal—its destruction. Alvin Toffler wrote that if you don't have a strategy you end up being part of someone else's strategy.

In a much more recent column, posted on Scheerpost on June 27, 2022, Hedges stressed the present-day relevance of his book on fascism for an understanding of the events of January 6, 2021:

The book was a warning that an American fascism, wrapped in the flag and clutching the Christian cross, was organizing to extinguish our anemic democracy. This assault is very far advanced. The connecting tissue among the disparate militia groups, QAnon conspiracy theorists, anti-abortion activists, right-wing patriot organizations, Second Amendment advocates, neo-Confederates and Trump supporters that stormed the Capitol on January 6 is this frightening Christian fascism.

In recent months Hedges has carried out what appears to be an astonishing political transformation, which has been demonstrated not only in what he now writes, but also in his current political activities.

Only three weeks ago, Hedges stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Libertarians, anti-Semites and right-wing militia elements at the "Rage Against the War Machine" rally in Washington, claiming that a "left-right" alliance was the only way to fight back effectively against the US-led war against Russia in Ukraine.

How can this shift in Hedges' political orientation—from a bitter opponent of fascists to their supine apologist and opportunist ally—be explained?

Marxists who have followed his writings over the years have noted two significant characteristics of his political outlook that make his present unmistakably right-wing orientation not entirely surprising.

The first is the mood of despair that pervades his writings. It is not merely a strange attraction for the macabre that leads Hedges to illustrate his columns with images of skulls, skeletons and other symbols of death. These images convey Hedges' view of the future. His denunciations of fascism invariably read as the desperate lamentations of one who is convinced of its unstoppable victory.

The second characteristic, and the source of Hedges' malignant pessimism, is his rejection of and opposition to Marxist theory and politics that define the working class as the basic revolutionary force in society and assign to it the leading and decisive role in the struggle against capitalism. As he does not believe that there exists any social force that can overthrow capitalism, Hedges is left with a perspective of hopelessness. This, in turn, has led Hedges to conclude that the struggle against war requires an alliance with fascists. But to secure that alliance, Hedges is compelled to renounce his past opposition to fascism and serve as its apologist.

Hedges' present political course will deeply disappoint his many readers who respected his past denunciations of the crimes of American imperialism. He would do well to critically reexamine his present political trajectory.



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