Heckled in Rockford

Editor's note: *Chris Hedges, the author of "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning," is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for The New York Times. This was the commencement speech he delivered at Rockford College on May 17, 2003 before a hostile crowd. We made this transcript from the transcript and audiotape on the Rockford Register Star's website, rrstar.com. Audience reaction is in brackets.*

I want to speak to you today about war and empire. The killing, or at least the worst of it, is over in Iraq. Although blood will continue to spill—theirs and ours—be prepared for this. 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. We have forfeited the goodwill, the empathy the world felt for us after 9/11. We have folded in on ourselves, we have severely weakened the delicate international coalitions and alliances that are vital in maintaining and promoting peace. And we are now part of a dubious troika in the war against terror with Vladimir Putin and Ariel Sharon, two leaders who do not shrink in Palestine or Chechnya from carrying out acts of gratuitous and senseless violence. We have become the company we keep.

The censure, and perhaps the rage, of much of the world—certainly the one-fifth of the world's population which is Muslim, most of whom I will remind you are not Arab—is upon us. Look today at the fourteen people killed last night in several explosions in Casablanca. And this rage, in a world where almost 50 percent of the planet struggles on less than two dollars a day, will see us targeted. Terrorism will become a way of life. ["No!"] And when we are attacked, we will, like our allies Putin and Sharon, lash out with greater fury. The circle of violence is a death spiral; no one escapes. We are spinning at a speed that we may not be able to hold.

As we revel in our military prowess—the sophistication of our military hardware and technology, for this is what most of the press coverage consisted of in Iraq—we lose sight of the fact that just because we have the capacity to wage war does not give us the right to wage war. This capacity has doomed empires in the past. “Modern Western civilization may perish,” the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr warned, “because it falsely worshiped technology as a final good.” The real injustices—the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, the brutal and corrupt dictatorships we fund in the Middle East—will mean that we will not rid the extremists who hate us with bombs. Indeed, we will swell their ranks. [Whistles.]

Once you master people by force, you depend on force for control. In your isolation, you begin to make mistakes. [“Where were you on September 11?”]

Fear engenders cruelty; cruelty . . . fear, insanity, and then paralysis. [Hoots. “Who wants to listen to this jerk?”]

In the center of Dante’s circle, the damned remained motionless. [Horns.]

We have blundered into a nation we know little about and are caught between bitter rivalries and competing ethnic groups and leaders we do not understand. We are trying to transplant a modern system of politics invented in Europe characterized, among other things, by the division of the Earth into independent secular states based on national citizenship in a land where the belief in a secular civil government is an alien creed. Iraq was a cesspool for the British when they occupied it in 1917. It will be a cesspool for us, as well. [“God bless America,” a woman shrieks.]

• The curfews. • The armed clashes with angry crowds that leave scores of Iraqi dead. • The military governor. • The Christian evangelical groups that are being allowed to follow on the heels of our occupying troops to try and teach Muslims about Jesus. • The occupation of the oil fields.

[At this point, the microphone gets unplugged. When it is fixed, Rockford College President Paul Pribbenow addresses the audience: “My friends, one of the wonders of a liberal arts college is its ability and its deeply held commitment to academic freedom and the decision to listen to each other’s opinions. If you wish to protest the speaker’s remarks, I ask that you do it in silence, as some of you are doing in the back. That is perfectly appropriate, but he has the right to offer his opinion here, and we would like him to continue his remarks.” [People blow horns and boo, and there is some applause. A man says, “When did liberal arts become liberal (inaudible)?”]

The occupation of the oil fields. [More boos. A woman says, “We’re not going to listen. We’ve listened enough. You’ve already ruined our graduation. Don’t ruin it any more, sir.”]

The notion that the Kurds and the Shiites will listen to the demands of a centralized government in Baghdad (the same Kurds and Shiites who died by the tens of thousands in defiance of Saddam Hussein, a man who happily butchered all of those who challenged him, and this ethnic rivalry has not gone away). • The looting of Baghdad, or let me say the looting of Baghdad with the exception of the oil ministry and the interior ministry—the only two ministries we bothered protecting—is self-immolation. [More boos.]

As someone who knows Iraq, speaks Arabic, and spent seven years in the Middle East, if the Iraqis believe rightly or wrongly that we come only for oil and occupation, they will begin a long, bloody war of attrition. It is how they drove the British out. And remember that, when the Israelis invaded southern Lebanon in 1982, they were greeted by the dispossessed Shiites as liberators, but within a few months, when the Shiites saw that the Israelis had come not as liberators but as occupiers, they began to kill them. It was Israel that created Hezbollah, and it was Hezbollah that pushed Israel out of southern Lebanon.

As William Butler Yeats wrote in “Meditations in Times of Civil War,” “We had fed the heart on fantasies / the heart’s grown brutal from the fare.” [Horns. “I never would have come if I knew I had to listen to this,” a woman yells.]

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, and 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. [“U.S.A., U.S.A.,” some in the crowd chant.]

We will pay for this, 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. Read Antigone, when the king imposes his will without listening to those he rules, or Thucydides’s history. [Heckling.]

Read how Athens’s expanding empire saw it become a tyrant abroad and then a tyrant at home, how the tyranny the Athenian leadership imposed on others it finally imposed on itself. This, Thucydides wrote, is what doomed Athenian democracy; Athens destroyed itself. For the instrument of empire is war, and war is a poison, a poison that at times we must ingest just as a cancer patient must ingest a poison to survive. But if we do not understand the poison of war—if we do not understand how deadly that poison is—it can kill us just as surely as the disease. [“It’s enough, it’s enough, it’s enough,” a woman says.]

We have lost touch with the essence of war. Following our defeat in Vietnam we became a better nation. We were humbled, even humiliated. We asked questions about ourselves we had not asked before. We were forced to see ourselves as others saw us, and the sight

was not always a pretty one. We were forced to confront our own capacity for atrocity—for evil—and in this we understood not only war but more about ourselves. But that humility is gone. War, we have come to believe, is a spectator sport. The military and the press—remember in wartime the press is always part of the problem—have turned war into a vast video arcade game. Its very essence—death—is hidden from public view.

There was no more candor in the Persian Gulf War or the war in Afghanistan or the war with Iraq than there was in Vietnam. [Horns.]

But in the age of live feeds and satellite television, the state and the military have perfected the appearance of candor. [Heckling.]

Because we no longer understand war, we no longer understand that it can all go horribly wrong. We no longer understand that war begins by calling for the annihilation of others but ends, if we do not know when to make or maintain peace, with self-annihilation. We flirt, given the potency of modern industrial weapons, with our own destruction. ["That's not true!"]

The seduction of war is insidious because so much of what we are told about it is true: It does create a feeling of comradeship, which obliterates our alienation and makes us, for perhaps the only time of our life, feel we belong. War allows us to rise above our small stations in life. We find nobility in a cause and feelings of selflessness and even bliss. And at a time of soaring deficits and financial scandals and the very deterioration of our domestic fabric, war is a fine diversion. War, for those who enter into combat, has a dark beauty, filled with the monstrous and the grotesque. The Bible calls it the lust of the eye and warns believers against it. War gives us a distorted sense of self; it gives us meaning. [Shouts of "Go home!" Then a man in the audience says, "Can I say a few words here?" And Hedges responds, "When I finish, yeah."]

Once in war, the conflict obliterates the past, and the future is all one heady, intoxicating present. You feel every heartbeat in war, colors are brighter, your mind races ahead of

itself. [Boos, and the microphone again is unplugged momentarily. “Should I keep going?” Hedges asks President Pribbenow, who responds, “It’s up to you.” Hedges asks, “Do you want me to stop?” Pribbenow says, “How close are you? Why don’t you bring it to a close?” Hedges says, “All right, I’ll bring it to a close.” More shouts of “Go home!” One person yells, “It’s not your graduation.”]

We feel in wartime comradeship. [Many loud boos.]

We confuse this with friendship, with love. There are those who will insist that the comradeship of war is love. The exotic glow that makes us in war feel as one people, one entity, is real, but this is part of war’s intoxication. [More boos.]

Think back on the days after the attacks on 9/11. Suddenly, we no longer felt alone; we connected with strangers, even with people we did not like. We felt we belonged, that we were somehow wrapped in the embrace of the nation, the community. In short, we no longer felt alienated. [“Go home!”]

As this feeling dissipated in the weeks after the attack, there was a kind of nostalgia for its warm glow. And wartime always brings with it this comradeship, which is the opposite of friendship. Friends, as J. Glenn Gray points out, are predetermined; friendship takes place between men and women who possess an intellectual and emotional affinity for each other. But comradeship—that ecstatic bliss that comes with belonging to the crowd in wartime—is within our reach. We can all have comrades. The danger of the external threat that comes when we have an enemy does not create friendship; it creates comradeship. And those in wartime are deceived about what they are undergoing. This is why once the threat is over, once war ends, comrades again become strangers to us. This is why, after war, we fall into despair. [“Atheist Stranger!”]

In friendship, there is a deepening of our sense of self. We become, through the friend, more aware of who we are and what we are about. We find ourselves in the eyes of the friend. Friends probe and question and challenge each other to make each of us more

complete. In comradeship, the kind that comes to us in patriotic fervor, there is a suppression of self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-possession. [Heckling.]

Comrades lose their identities in wartime for the collective rush of a common cause—a common purpose. In comradeship there are no demands on the self. This is part of its appeal and one of the reasons we miss it and seek to recreate it. ["Go home! Go home!"]

Comradeship allows us to escape the demands on the self that is part of friendship. In wartime when we feel threatened, we no longer face death alone but as a group, and this makes death easier to bear. We ennoble self-sacrifice for the other, for the comrade. [Boos.]

In short, we begin to worship death. And this is what the god of war demands of us. Think finally of what it means to die for a friend. It is deliberate and painful; there is no ecstasy. For friends, dying is hard and bitter. The dialogue they have and cherish will perhaps never be recreated. Friends do not, the way comrades do, love death and sacrifice. To friends, the prospect of death is frightening. And this is why friendship—or, let me say, love—is the most potent enemy of war. Thank you. [Loud boos, whistles, horns, a little applause. A man says, "This is the most destructive thing you've ever done to this college, Dr. Pribbenow. You should never have allowed him to speak."]

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