

# War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning

Author(s): Chris Hedges

Format: Paperback, 224 pages

Publisher: Anchor (June 10, 2003)

ISBN: 1400034639

Reviewer: **Abdurrahman R. Squires**

Website: [www.Muslim-Answers.org](http://www.Muslim-Answers.org)

Weblog: [www.MereIslam.info](http://www.MereIslam.info)



---

## Have the courage to take this book to heart

The world would be a better place if all military commanders, politicians, parents, wives and soldier wannabes would read this powerful, disturbing and deeply personal reflection on war by a veteran correspondent. Unfortunately, **War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning** is so thoughtful, authoritative and convincing that I fear the people who need it most, like FoxNews warmongers, chickenhawk jingoists and flag-waving nationalists, will find it too unsettling. Unlike most of them, the author has experienced the reality of war first-hand and bears both its physical and emotional scars.

I've read quite a few war memoirs, but this one is certainly the most moving, painful and thought provoking. This multifaceted book is not simply a chronicle of a journalist's observations of war, but it's more of a personal confession that dabbles in everything from the value of reading the Classics to moral philosophy. The author's observations are very heartfelt as he, throughout the seven chapters that address various aspects of killing and combat, tries to convince the reader of the utter horrors and senselessness of war. Although the book is chock full of the author's own deep moral insights and disturbing anecdotes, it contains historical accounts and reflections on other insightful war literature as well. On one level, the book is a plea from the author to accept what he knows so that others don't have to learn the hard way.

From the Balkans to the Sudan and from Central America to the Middle East, Chris Hedges has pretty much seen it all, thus he doesn't come across as some limp-wristed bleeding-heart journalist. Rather it quickly becomes quite clear that he's a recovering war junkie who has finally decided to come clean. He does this

in a somber and matter-of-fact way, which is free of both narcissism and self-loathing. Hedges presents war as an addictive drug that is sold to us not only by our governments and our societal myths, but he also exposes war as lust, war as sex, war as senselessness, war as selfishness and many other aspects of its fathomless ugliness.

His reflections and insights are invaluable in this Post-9/11 world in which Americans are being duped into misunderstanding, hating and killing those "others" who, in essence, are not much different than themselves. Chris Hedges does his best to convince people to strive to be more humane, more compassionate and more thoughtful. The author knows that getting us to recognize that war is always horrible and should be avoided (an idea which many people pay lip-service to but don't really believe) won't turn us into pacifists or even wimps, and he's certainly not out to do that. Rather, he's trying to convince his readers that killing human beings is a serious matter far beyond the comprehension of those who have never experienced the ravages and horror of modern war. Likewise, he's trying to clear the smoke screen of propaganda and snap people out of their myopic patriotism so that they don't remain dupes of their governments or victims of the great war myths that they're being fed.

In its essence, **War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning** is an effort to get people to experience war on a vicarious level, and I feel that Chris Hedges is as successful in this effort as any author could be. He does a subtle and profound—and sometimes quite graphic—job of explaining how killing damages the soul of the killer. He discusses how enemies are dehumanized not only in the minds of soldiers, but in the consciousness of entire nations, thus making war and mass killing palpable. After reading only a few pages, I respected the author for his ability to see government propaganda for what it is (regardless of how it's packaged) and for his readiness to question conventional wisdom. He ruthlessly exposes the simplemindedness and lack of reflection about "the other" that's still going on during this so-called "War on Terror" and he brushes aside the "false covenants of race, nationalism, class, and gender" that are often used just to manipulate the masses. Unfortunately, I think a lot of people won't have the courage to finish this book, since reading it will help them see most flag wavers as the bigoted cheerleaders that they are. Indeed, this book reminds us that the goal of patriotic rhetoric is to "invoke pity for one's own" and while America mourns her dead, "we are blind to those whom we and our allies in the Middle East have crushed...They seem not to count". If there's a contemporary piece of writing that will help to open one's eyes to the ugliness that's going on in the world

today, then this book is it. It's all about how to stop hating, start thinking and learning how to love. **War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning** certainly gets the job done.

Abdurrahman R. Squires

© MMV