

Hooked on war: The media fix

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

Nothing compares to the rush. No other pursuit could be so exhilarating and meaningful, so loaded with the paradoxical sensation of being entirely alive yet also careening out of control on the edge of death. For those who taste its deliciously deadly nectar, there is usually no turning back.

This gripping potion, according to author and *New York Times* correspondent Chris Hedges, is not cocaine or peyote or ambition or rage. It is war. Those who cover war—as he did for two decades in Central America, the Middle East and Bosnia—become as addicted to its ephemeral rewards as do those wearing the uniform in the trenches. He recounts his struggle with the narcotic of war in *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (Anchor).

And those who consume reports from the frontlines in kitchens and living rooms back home, Hedges argues, can seldom avoid getting intoxicated by and addicted to the sanitized version they imbibe.

“The seduction of war is insidious,” Hedges told a crowd of about 400 at Wellesley Congregational Church in Wellesley, Massachusetts, in January. “It gives us a false sense of power and safety. It makes us feel, for perhaps the first time in our lives, that we belong.

“The press in wartime always masks the essence of war, which is death. We are spared the pools of blood, the agony in the streets. Such coverage would hardly boost ratings. The myth of war, honor and patriotism boosts ratings. Real war does not.”

Through the course of a speech, panel discussion and youth group conversation, Hedges led an assembly made up mostly of critics of the Iraq war on a tour of the major forces at work to make the evils of war palatable to the public. Rather than allege any government or news media conspiracy, he instead laid out how market forces and the timeless allure of war make a deceitful stew.

Listeners clung to every word, but the more they heard about war's seductive allure, the more some expressed their fear—as lunch was served beneath gilded chandeliers and in freshly renovated classrooms at one of Massachusetts's wealthiest churches—that they too might be too comfortable to break free.

“We're all very well paid, well fed, in comfortable homes. It's far away from us,” said John Watts, a Quaker. “I think if they reinstituted the draft it would be a very good thing because people would start paying attention to the human cost.”

Addiction to war begins, Hedges explained in a speech replete with references to classical Rome and Greece, with troops seduced by comradeship. Self-awareness is suppressed along with self-knowledge as group identity takes shape. “In comradeship, there are no demands on the self,” Hedges said. Individuals feel part of a cause greater than the self-interested pursuit of personal happiness. The addiction has begun to take root.

Reporters catch the bug. Those sent into life-threatening situations quickly give up whatever objectivity their editors might imagine they bring to the job. Rookies, for instance, rely for personal protection on the unit to which they are assigned, and they quickly develop a reciprocal loyalty to their protectors when they write. This interpretation from Hedges got corroboration from fellow panelist Liz Walker, a former Boston television anchor.

“You are very dependent on who got you there,” Walker said. “And if the military got you there, then ‘rah rah’ is exactly what you're going to do.”

Newcomers to the war beat aren't the only ones whose addiction causes them to surrender both objectivity and freedom. Veterans come to run on the fuel of “thanatos,” Hedges said, referring to the death-seeking, destructive force in human nature. His friends and colleagues have often resigned themselves to the likelihood of dying on the job. Though they try to break away, as *Boston Globe* reporter Elizabeth Neuffer did during the 1991 gulf war, they often can't stay away. Neuffer returned to Iraq to cover the war's aftermath and died when a tire on her car blew out. (Because of the postwar embargo, replacement tires were scarce in Iraq.)

Those providing news from the front, therefore, are enamored with war itself, with their own protectors, or with those they perceive to be innocent victims. All war reporters are tempted to romanticize the subject, Hedges explained, even though such personal investment is seldom acknowledged.

Even more tempting is to give readers or viewers what they want to see: a sanitized version of what is actually a horrific reality. The reason stories from Iraq seldom convey the carnage wrought by missiles, bombs or hand grenades is not government or media censorship, Hedges said. Such stories don't get published or produced because consumers don't want them. They instead want stories that feed their own addiction to the myth and cause of war, stories of bravery and patriotism.

"We don't really want to know what a cruise missile does in central Baghdad," Hedges said, noting that few Americans are aware that 10,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed since the invasion began less than a year ago. "Nobody wants to read about it. In electronic media, news is judged solely on its entertainment value. If it's not entertaining, we don't do it."

Hedges acknowledged how he himself had tried several times to break his own addiction to war before successfully leaving the field. In his case, the turning point came when his young son, plagued by nightmares of his father being killed, asked in a session with a therapist if his dad still had legs.

For Americans to recall what they learned from Vietnam about the horror of war, Hedges lamented, they may need to undergo all over again the pain of losing loved ones. His one scenario for cutting short the war in Iraq: reinstitute the draft. He shared the idea with a group of junior and senior high schoolers.

"When it isn't just poor kids who couldn't get health insurance who are over there," Hedges told the group of sober-faced teenagers on bean-bag chairs, "but when it's kids like you, kids from Wellesley High School, who are dying, I can guarantee there will be outrage and demands for the war to end." After that, they asked him no more questions.