MARK GONNERMAN: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director, and it’s always a pleasure to walk into Kresge Auditorium and feel the expectant energy of a crowd like this gathered for a public conversation.

Tonight we are here to discuss “The Truth of War” with veteran New York Times war correspondent Chris Hedges, writer Tony Swofford, and Dr. David Spiegel of the Stanford School of Medicine. I’ll introduce David in a moment and he will further introduce our two guests.

People often ask me how an event like this comes to be, and usually it begins with a question. The question I posed to Chris Hedges last winter was, “With whom would you like to be seated in a public conversation?” He immediately replied, “Someone with combat experience.” Tony Swofford’s name soon came up, and then I had the unenviable task of tracking down a former Marine Corps scout sniper finishing a novel while hiding out in New York City. I don’t think he wanted to be found. But a few well-placed phone calls worked, and when I was able to get to him, he promptly and generously replied, saying that, yes, he would be glad to join us in late October because then his new novel would be done. Then, when Dr. Spiegel said he would lend his expertise to moderating this discussion tonight, we were all set.

I have long admired Professor Spiegel both for his legendary integrity as a medical researcher and for his pioneering success in establishing the Stanford Center for Integrative Medicine at our medical school in 1988. This important multidisciplinary center takes the best of so-called alternative and complementary medical practices and combines them with modern medical science to provide care for both the body and the mind—the whole person. Dr. Spiegel completed his degree in philosophy at Yale before going to Harvard, where he completed his medical training in psychiatry. He then came to Stanford in 1975 to become a member of the medical school faculty. He is well known for his work in psychosomatic medicine, having published over 300 papers in journals and as book chapters. From 1976 to 1980, he was the director of Social Psychiatry and Community Medicine at the Palo Alto Veterans’ Administration Medical Center where still now, amidst all his other responsibilities here at Stanford, he is a physician and consultant.
I will soon turn the floor over to him, but first I want to explain our format tonight. It’s our typical Aurora Forum program format where we have 45 minutes of on-stage conversation followed by another 45 minutes of audience conversation. When we get to that point in the program, if you have a comment or question to pose—no speeches, please—please line up behind one of the aisle microphones and our moderator will recognize you. Tonight’s program is being taped for future broadcast on KQED Public Radio, so please visit our Web site, auroraforum.org, for information about this and other Aurora Forum program offerings.

It is hoped that tonight’s conversation will help demythologize the romantic mythology of war that is part and parcel of the militarization of our society. For this mythology, when unexamined, enables the most powerful people in our society to continuously and so harmfully exploit many of the most vulnerable: our young men and women.

Thank you very much for being here tonight, and please join me in welcoming our guests to the Aurora Forum stage. [Applause]

**David Spiegel:** Thank you very much, Mark. I’m honored to be here. It is said that truth is the first casualty of war. I think we’re gathered here tonight in the hope that perhaps war might be the first casualty of truth. We have two experts here who can share their long experience and help us to demythologize war. The first, Chris Hedges, has been a *New York Times* war correspondent for decades. He is currently the Anschutz Distinguished Fellow at Princeton. He was a foreign correspondent and was the *Times* bureau chief in the Middle East and the Balkans. He saw combat on multiple continents, including Latin America and the Balkans. He himself was a prisoner of war during this time. He holds a Bachelor’s degree in English from Colgate University and a Master of Divinity degree from Harvard University. He is the author of a number of very compelling books, including *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics’ Award for nonfiction. He also wrote *What Every Person Should Know About War*, a kind of user’s guide for people considering entering war, and *Losing Moses on the Freeway*. His current book has the gentle title *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*. I wonder how that story’s going to come out.

Tony Swofford served as a U.S. Marine Corps surveillance and target acquisition scout sniper in the first Gulf War, the war that temporarily gave war a good name again. He attended the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop and wrote the widely acclaimed book *Jarhead: A Marine’s Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles*. It was released as a major motion picture in 2005 and it presents a very intimate and realistic view of what life was like on the inside of the Marine Corps. He now has a new novel out, *Exit A: A Novel*, that will be published in January of next year.

I want to welcome Chris and Tony and thank you very much for being with us. [Applause]
One of the most disturbing statistics in What Every Person Should Know About War is that we have had peace over the last 3,000 years in only 8 percent of human history, so most of the time we have been at war. I think one of the puzzling and intriguing things in both of your writings has been the kind of fatal attraction that mankind seems to have for combat. I wonder if we could start out by asking you both to describe what the allure of war is. What is it that keeps us so attracted to this terrible thing?

Chris Hedges: I think there are several attractions. The first I would describe as comradeship as opposed to friendship—that notion that when you have an external enemy, when you believe that there is a force that is going to obliterate you as a group, whether it’s you as an ethnic group or you as a nation, it seems to obliterate our alienation. It seems to create feelings of equality. It gives us a kind of moral license to commit any act in the name of our self-preservation or the name of the nation or the name of the ethnic group that we come from. I think that it essentially removes not only that alienation that many of us in modern society live with, but it removes the checks or the curbs—it gives us a kind of moral license—to commit acts that normally we would never commit in peacetime society.

I think that in wartime you very quickly divide populations into two groups, both of which become very demented and perverted and deformed by war. One is that group that doesn’t go to war, that believes in the jingoism, the triumphalism, that swallows that dark elixir of nationalism (and remember, the flip side of nationalism is always a raw kind of racism); and the other group is those who go into combat. No soldier or marine after about 30 seconds of combat believes in the myth of war, those abstract terms of glory, honor, and heroism which, in moments of fighting, become hollow, if not obscene.

What happens to people who are engaged in a conflict is different from what happens to people who stand on the sidelines and wave the flag. That kind of flag-waving doesn’t go down in a war zone anymore. Something else happens. Yes, the feelings of comradeship are similar. I’ve likened them to and believe it is correct to say that war is probably the most powerful narcotic invented by humankind. In the span of even a few hours in Sarajevo, I think you could experience an intensity that replicates the most powerful drugs that are on the market. You see hallucinogenic landscapes that are beyond the realm of imagination. You get zipped up on adrenaline rushes. Because you never sleep well, you fall into zombie-like states—these out-of-body experiences.

So it’s possible to get caught up in a war when you’re actually on the ground and have to do the combat and hate war but become addicted to the experience that war gives you. Soldiers and marines call it a “combat high.” It’s very real and it’s something that I, as a war correspondent, like many war photographers and war journalists, felt. I started in El Salvador in the early 80s and ended 20 years later in Kosovo, and there wasn’t much I missed in between. But we would end a conflict, fall into a kind of despair, and figure out how we were going to get to the next conflict. So there were actually reporters in Kosovo who I had covered the war with in El Salvador two decades before. It has a powerful allure. We were talking about this at dinner: We used to say in war zones, “Give an 18-year-old kid an automatic weapon and in four days he becomes God.” It is
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that ability to revoke another person’s charter to live on this earth, and that all things become objects, including human beings—objects to either gratify or destroy or both, and almost no one is immune from the contagion of that.

**Spiegel:** Tony, does that resonate with you?

**Anthony Swofford:** Everything Chris said resonates with me. For me personally, it was seductive because I was going to belong to this group. At 18 years of age, I was going to join a group that was going to make me stronger, that was going to allow me to commit acts of violence. Although at the time I wouldn’t call it a psychosis, in the end what it does is induce a kind of temporary psychosis. It allows a person to inhabit a kind of godlike stance. Personally, the group was important to me and what Chris called “comradeship” rather than “friendship.” On top of all those things, I also thought I was going to be sexier. It’s sexy. Chris, in *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, often refers to the nearly sexual charge that can come about because of combat. That was certainly part of it as well. And there is the glory of dying for one’s country. I bought into all of those things—the things that, in fact, Chris’s other book, *What Every Person Should Know About War*, attempts to dispute. For me, growing up in the ‘80s, media played a large part. In the early pages of *Jarhead*, I write about watching war films with my fellow marines, and there was something exciting and pornographic about that which was obliterated about 30 seconds into the first time I was fired at.

**Spiegel:** One of the things that puzzles me as you both talk about this is that I recall talking to Vietnam vets who were in the killer squads in Vietnam who put a knife in their teeth and crawled into the jungle, and they felt immortal. They had the most dangerous job—their average life expectancy was a month—but they thought, If I haven’t gotten it yet, they’re not going to get me. What is it about being in these very dangerous experiences that gives you the fantasy that you control this instead of being its potential victim?

**Swofford:** I think it’s having the weaponry in your hands to take another’s life and also believing that the group will save you—that you will live and die with the group. The weaponry and the violence offer immortality.

**Hedges:** For me, that changed the first time I had a close colleague killed: John Hoagland in the war in Salvador. When I was in my early 20s covering the war, I did believe I was immortal, but when he died, I realized…. That was a big shift for me. I don’t know if you had a similar experience.

**Swofford:** For me, I think it happened the first time we were fired on by the enemy. I realized that really what was going to happen was confusion and fear and sometimes, as well, helplessness and humiliation.

**Spiegel:** One of the things we’ve observed in working with people with Post-Traumatic Stress symptoms is that they feel strangely guilty. They feel they should have controlled events they don’t control. We were talking about this reporter who grabbed a hand
grenade and lost his hand throwing it out of a Humvee and he blamed himself for it. How do you deal with the helplessness, and do you find thinking you’re in more control than in fact you are is a way of coping with the danger?

Hedges: Well, you become superstitious. I always wore the same Coptic cross with my dog tags. Because you can’t control the events around you, you create a fiction. I remember a good friend of mine, Kurt Schork, who was eventually killed in an ambush in Sierra Leone. In Sarajevo—and this was at a time when the city was being hit with upwards of 2,000 shells a day, constant sniper fire, four to five dead a day, two dozen wounded a day, and these were massive pieces of artillery (90 mm. tank rounds, 155 mm. Howitzers, Katyusha rockets)—the city was really getting pummeled. And there had been a shelling where people had been killed, and Kurt showed up in one of these old Yugoslav cars, a Zastava. We called them “thin-skinned,” which meant that they weren’t armored. He worked for Reuter’s; he had an armored car. And I had my armored car. And I said, “Kurt, where’s your armor?” And he said, “No. I woke up and I knew today they couldn’t hit me.” Well, Kurt was a Rhodes Scholar. And I say that only to show that no one is immune from it. So I think one of the big things is that you become superstitious. How do you cope with feelings of helplessness? In the moment, you don’t. I graduated from Harvard Divinity School, I read Karl Barth, and I can remember lying in the dirt praying (and I never prayed), saying, “God, if you get me out of here I’ll never do this again.” I’m embarrassed to admit it, but it’s true. But a few hours later, I’m in a bar in San Salvador, and it’s a big cosmic joke. I think for us, as war correspondents, there was a kind of constant cat-and-mouse game where we liked flirting with the danger; we got a rush off of it. I think it’s in The River War that Winston Churchill writes that there’s nothing so exhilarating as being shot at without success. There’s a truth to that. So in those few moments throughout my career when I really thought I was going to die, it was really terrifying and horrifying, but once we got out of it, I think we found it enticing and we went back and sought it out again and again and again, and that’s really what people in my career did.

Spiegel: So it made you feel oddly alive.

Hedges: Well, not oddly. You are aware in ways that you never were before. There’s a Zen-like quality to being in combat. Colors are brighter; you are really present.

Spiegel: One of the other emotions that we were talking about earlier, Tony, was a sense of betrayal. In your book you describe vividly a sense in which you’re the victim of friendly fire. In your book, one of the statistics that’s really scary is that 20 percent of all deaths in combat are from friendly fire—from your own side. Could you talk a little about how it felt when you saw the incoming…

Swofford: During the Gulf War, it was actually 35 percent. There were many fewer casualties, but that was percentage. War is confusing anyway. We had been fighting, making small movements across the border for a few days, and this was the major movement of the division into southern Kuwait and we crossed through a minefield. The war was progressing much quicker than anyone imagined and units on our right had
bypassed us when they weren’t supposed to. Their tanks saw the convoy which was a few hundred yards behind our point—my platoon was on point for the battalion—and they began firing at our convoys. First, there was utter confusion and then there was the realization that these were our own tanks and this was not supposed to happen; this was not how people are supposed to die. That betrayal—it was a mistake. It was a failure of command and control, but for a 20-year-old kid on the ground, it was a betrayal because what you are taught from first joining the Marine Corps is that, in fact, this institution will always protect you, and that doesn’t always happen. Friendly fire instances are especially corrosive to one’s comfort. You have to have some kind of comfort at war, and when the command begins to fail, that’s really corrosive.

**Hedges:** I just want to add to that, having covered less disciplined forces, especially in the Balkans, where you had numerous militias and warlords running their own sort of private armies, that it’s always far more dangerous to confront ad hoc or hastily formed groups where there is no command and control. When you run into a road block in the Congo and they’re all 14 years old and their pupils are dilated, that’s always the most frightening. I was in the Shiite uprising in Basra after the Gulf War and was eventually captured and taken prisoner by the Iraqi Republican Guard—I like to say I was “embedded” with the Iraqi Republican Guard—and my biggest fear was that something would happen to Saddam Hussein because half of Basra had been taken over by the rebels, the whole southern province had erupted, and we had army units that had defected to the rebel side so that when we got caught in a very bad ambush on the second or third day, it was 16 hours of fighting. I can remember we were going through a village and rebel units in the village opened fire on the convoy where I was a prisoner, and it was raining and we dove out and were crawling around in the mud. And the soldiers were screaming to each other, “Askari! Askari!” which is the Arabic word for army. They were terrified that they were being hit by the army. So I think that you learn to respect command and control because when that’s not there, it’s just a Hobbesian universe. I remember going into a village in Croatia where the warlord who ran his little private army—and we had a series a little private armies all throughout (they characterized the war in the Balkans)—was driving around the town, and the hood ornament on his car was the skull of the imam of the town.

**Spiegel:** One has to wonder what effect that has on you after you return home. That is, you spend time in combat hoping to stay alive, being afraid of dying. Then you come home and many people are afraid of living. They have trouble with relationships. You mentioned in your book the difference between comradeship and friendship. In friendship, you learn more about yourself and in comradeship, you try to forget about yourself, in a sense. There was an example in *Jarhead* with Fergus, a guy who had been a buddy of yours in combat, and he comes down to visit afterward and something isn’t the same. Could you talk about that a little?

**Swofford:** Yes. He was a psychological wreck. This was three to four years after we had both left the Marine Corps and he was still wearing his fatigues and he was still very much using the lingo of the military. He was hyper-aroused. He was drinking a lot. In fact, I was then, too. When we returned from war in ’91, one way in which we dulled our
pain was by drinking, and I was still in the Marine Corps for another 18 months, and that continued for me to some extent. Fergus was particularly lost and was a smart young man who indeed was kind of unable to live, unable to adjust.

**Spiegel:** The old comradeships go, but I wonder if you could both talk also about the effect of having been in situations like that on forming real friendships. What does it do to your ability to do that?

**Hedges:** Let me add a little bit on comradeship because it’s a point that was first articulated for me in a great book by a philosopher named J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle.* I think comradeship is the opposite of friendship. I think that oftentimes people caught up in a war zone, and not just soldiers and marines or combatants, but if you even looked at people who, for instance, lived in the city of Sarajevo, suddenly everybody became your brother or your sister. There were those calls for self-sacrifice. It is very intoxicating, but it is all about the suppression of self-awareness and self-knowledge. It’s about the fact that as long as you become part of the crowd and you chant what the crowd chants and you believe what the crowd believes and you’re willing to die for and carry out what the crowd wants, you are enveloped in this warm embrace that’s very enticing. But once that external enemy is gone, all of those comrades again become strangers to us. You see it with soldiers and marines, and oftentimes when they go back for reunions where they reconnect with the people they served with, I think—unless you’re sick, you don’t love war, and I think even soldiers and marines don’t love war—I think what they’re trying to recreate is that comradeship which they often try to do by consuming immense amounts of alcohol, but it can’t be recreated. There’s a pathetic kind of yearning for it, especially living in modernity where I think so many of us are so isolated. And I think that’s a really important distinction to remember: that when comrades essentially in theological terms are enveloped by that comradeship, it’s all about sacrifice and even self-sacrifice, and what you’re doing is sort of kneeling before the god of death, which is what war is. And I think for friendship, death holds a great deal of fear because that dialogue that you have and cherish with a friend, with the loss of that friend can probably never be recreated, and I think that’s why friends love and fear deeply death in a way that comrades don’t. But that factor of comradeship—you saw it after 9/11. Suddenly, neighbors across the hall that you couldn’t stand became—at least if you lived in New York…you felt solidarity with them. And I think that in the weeks after 9/11, being in the city, there was a kind of nostalgia for that warm glow and that belief that you are one. And that’s why you find soldiers and marines who are sick, but when their unit is deployed, they want to go with that unit. Especially when you’ve been through combat and you’re alienated from all the people at home who are still caught up in that jingoistic cant of what war is, it creates that divide. Comradeship is powerful.

**Spiegel:** Let’s look at the other side of the coin then. What does the experience of combat and this false friendship do to your ability to create real friendships—to be loving, to develop relationships afterward?
Swofford: On the tail end of what Chris just said, I’d also give an anecdote. I visited Bethesda Hospital in Maryland this past weekend and visited marines who had recently been injured, some as few as seven days out of an injury. There was a young man who had lost two fingers including his trigger finger, and also had suffered some other injuries. But he was most concerned about the fact that he’d been injured after being in Iraq for only two weeks and his unit was still over there and he could never go back because he had lost his trigger finger.

I had difficulty forming normal relationships both with friends and with my family upon returning. Often it was an issue of trust. I think comradeship offers an illusion about trust. For me, returning to the civilian world, I had these distorted standards for how and why I would trust someone. It took me three to four years to be able to enter into a normal friendship and love relationship.

Spiegel: What helped you turn the corner?

Swofford: Really, just time and distance from the Marine Corps. I was also very…. I really wanted to put distance between myself and that experience. I knew that what happened to me at 18 when I joined the Marine Corps…that some pretty radical changes had occurred and that when I left the Marine Corps at 22, I didn’t want to live that kind of life anymore. I wanted to live a different life. Partly, I think I did that through education.

Spiegel: People who come back from combat, as we’ve heard, are haunted by memories, but combat experience does funny things to memory as well. I wonder if you could talk a little about…. There is one wonderful image in your book of somebody’s memories of combat being like seeing your reflection in a piece of broken glass—that you see it in fragments. I wonder if you could talk about that.

Hedges: Before I do that, I just want to….

Spiegel: These guys have been in combat. They don’t take anybody’s questions the way we do. [Laughter]

Hedges: What Tony talked about is important, because the only emotion that can’t be subsumed in communal life is love. So the wartime culture or comradeship has this special weapon against love, which is smut. All of the ways they talk about human relationships in the military when you’re caught up in that kind of environment: they speak about the act of love like they speak about defecation or digestion. It does not have an erotic, appealing effect. Freud writes about this. For Freud, that charismatic dictator or leader essentially took the place of the power of love, and he writes about the eroticism and all that. I think that’s very real. I think that in wartime society, there is a kind of constant war against love because when someone is deeply in love…. For instance, in the Balkans we saw this. The people who remained sane in the war in the Balkans were often the Serbs who were married to the Muslims. Their wife was Muslim or Serb and they couldn’t get caught up in that nationalist cant. So people who prosecute war, I think in a very real way go after the act of love and seek to replace it with comradeship.
In terms of returning, I was five years alone in El Salvador, which would have been
enough, so by the time I was done, I was pretty much of a mess, drinking heavily. Like a
lot of war correspondents, I couldn’t let go. By the time I got to Sarajevo, I knew I
shouldn’t be doing it, but I did it and I did the war on Kosovo. By the time I got to the
war in Kosovo, I didn’t get off on it anymore. I just felt afraid. I did it. I gritted my
teeth. I knew logistically how to do it. I was good at it but I really didn’t like it. And I
knew I had to get out, but I couldn’t adjust. When we got back from Bosnia, we got
R&R and we’d go to Paris, and I can remember walking down the streets of Paris, and
literally it was as if I would see the street scene through a tunnel. I felt completely
disconnected. I only wanted to get back to Sarajevo because it was the environment, in a
perverted kind of way, that fed my own pathology. I was around people, however twisted
and messed up, who at least I understood and they understood me. I really couldn’t
adjust to the routine and normalcy of a peacetime society.

So after the war in Kosovo, I took a fellowship at Harvard for a year and then of course
turned right around and went back to the Balkans and then the second Intifada or
Palestinian uprising again and I was back in Gaza. And I got caught in a very bad
ambush at the Netzarim Junction in Gaza where a Palestinian kid was shot through the
chest and killed about 15 feet away from me. I’m 40 years old and running down the
road and this kid is dead. The friends are all about 17 or 18. One is carrying what looks
like a sack of flour, one has an arm or a leg and plastic bags full of Molotov cocktails and
we’re being shot at by Israeli snipers, and I realized I had to get out. But all that said, it
was a three-year process. It was extremely difficult. And I lost a lot of friends, including
Kurt, including Elizabeth Neuffer and John Kelly in the war in Iraq. We all had this
discussion. But, you know, it was the boredom. And there is a Peter Pan quality to going
off to war. You don’t have to think about tomorrow because tomorrow may not come.
So there’s a real irresponsibility, not only in terms of how you live your life but in human
relationships.

The hardest part is reconnecting, and I have children and I think that helped me a lot. But
all of that said, you said three years, and for me, I think it was three years to pull myself
back together. I was not an alcoholic—a lot of the people I work with are
alcoholics—but I was abusive in drinking. I would drink and part of it is because if you
drink heavily enough, you don’t remember your dreams, and that became a way to cope
with nightmares. I would say now I haven’t been in a…I think I was in Gaza in 2000, so
six years ago was the last time I was in a situation where there was shooting, but I still
will have horrible dreams that are not nightmares; it’s the re visitation of trauma. You
wake up in the morning and first of all, you’re exhausted, and you are traumatized and
you’re numb. You can’t connect to anyone around you. As a writer, I get up in the
morning and take my kids to school and I write from about 8:30 to 3, so that’s my normal
day. On the days when I would have these at first, I would try to get out and go through
the motions, but of course I couldn’t write anything. I couldn’t focus. I was just
physically too tired and too distracted. And sometimes, I don’t know if you’ve had this,
but the worst is when they come in waves. If you have one night like that, you’re just
wiped out. You go to bed at 9:30 and then at one in the morning, oftentimes I jolt awake.
very suddenly, sometimes with a gasp, and then you can’t sleep. And when you get three or four nights like that, it is really completely debilitating. That’s how I look at it— as a kind of disability. That has not gone away. And when that happens, I have a very hard time connecting with people around me. It hearkens back to that initial period of reentry when I just couldn’t connect. I remember coming back that first Christmas and I helped my little nine-year-old son build a gingerbread house, and when we finished, I said, “And now we can play Bosnia and burn it down.” And it was a reflexive action, but I had come out of a world where we burned houses and then we dynamited the foundations and we killed everyone inside.

Spiegel: That’s terribly compelling. Have you had experiences like that, too, Tony?

Swofford: Well, I think Chris has seen much more war than I have. As much as we’ve pointed out the problems with the idea of comradeship, I was also lucky enough to return from war and still have 18 months to serve in the Marine Corps and to be around the men that I’d served with, and we in fact talked about what we had been through quite often, and I think that was helpful to me.

Spiegel: I think that’s very important: a period of processing and trying to put things into perspective so that they don’t just overwhelm you and flood you or you just try to run away from them or drink yourself away from them, but finding that way of working it through, I think, can be very helpful. I’m wondering also if we could shift a little in the discussion about demythologizing war to one of the other myths that comes up, which is that the people who are most likely to be hurt and killed in war are soldiers. There was an article in this week’s journal, the Lancet, on a house-to-house survey in Iraq showing that 650,000 civilians have been killed since the beginning of the Iraq war—650,000. So I wonder if you could comment on that piece of mythology and who is in fact vulnerable in war.

Hedges: For me, the only way to see a war is to see it through the eyes of the victims. And I think part of the problem is that we almost always see war through the eyes of the killers. We may understand that these people are demented and we may understand that they do things they shouldn’t do, but I think the subtext of that is that we identify with the power they possess. In fact, most people in a war zone are completely helpless and powerless—the vast majority of people. Part of the distortion of the war in Iraq is that we only see it through the eyes of the occupiers. We don’t understand the terror that an Iraqi family feels when a patrol of Humvees goes in at 50 miles an hour racing through their village and an IED [Improvised Explosive Device] goes off and they lay down suppressing fire and obliterate both sides of the street. Tony writes this great passage in Jarhead about how they’re all sitting watching Platoon and all these war movies, and how war images are always pornographic to the military man. It doesn’t matter what these directors intended. Civilians may see it and think that war is horrible. (I don’t know why I’m reciting his book, but it’s really a great book—one of the great memoirs of war and certainly the best memoir of the Iraq war and I classify it as one of the great war memoirs that I’ve read.)
People who are not caught up in the military culture see it and think war is terrible, but the actual killers or the people who do the killing look at these weapons and it feeds their lust or passion, that intoxication and that empowerment that comes with violence. And I think it’s probably impossible to create antiwar films or documentaries that also have images of battle; it’s like trying to condemn pornography and then showing erotic love scenes. The prurient fascination with violent death overpowers the message.

So the most potent antiwar films for me are the ones that eschew images of violence. I think René Clément’s great 1952 film, *Jeux interdits*, or *Forbidden Games*, would be a good example. That’s a story of two young children. The only scene of violence is at the very beginning of the film where a convoy is strafed, the parents of a young girl are killed, she ends up living in a village. The war is raging around them but we no longer see the war and they become obsessed with burying things because of course she’s explained that her parents are now under the ground and the little boy and girl create their own cemetery where they bury pets and chickens, and I think that gets to the essence of war, which is death.

But the problem is that the voices of the victims who have something real and important to say about war are almost never heard during wartime. Memoirs come out years later. Certainly years from now, some young Iraqi girl or boy will expound the horrors of the war in Iraq, but by then it won’t have any effect because whatever new adventure the war makers are pushing us toward, we will be told that these memoirs don’t have any bearing on the glorious enterprise that the nation is about to embark upon. So the testimonies and the memoirs are there, but unfortunately they almost never come out during the conflict itself and that allure of power—of unlimited, godlike power—even in a supposedly antiwar film is enticing even when we try to guard ourselves against it.

**Spiegel:** In terms of that number of 650,000 deaths, clearly there were many sighs from the audience and that shouldn’t be that shocking. Chris, probably 250,000 civilians died during the Gulf War and I don’t think anyone really has that number either, but we should.

**Swofford:** It’s a very stark illustration of how we focus on identifying with the power and not with the people who are harmed by the war. There’s a great book by the *Washington Post* correspondent Anthony Shadid, whom you may know, Chris. It’s called *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War*. He followed about half a dozen Iraqi families from April or May of 2003 for about 18 months, and it gives a really fascinating look at the civilian victims of this war. That’s the only account that comes to my mind.

**Hedges:** And that’s true really since the creation of modern industrial warfare in the First World War, where we created weapons that could cause thousands of people to die in an instant without ever seeing their attackers. Once we created industrial warfare, it was primarily civilians in terms of numbers who died. One million Vietnamese died. I think 250,000 people were killed when McNamara decided to bomb North Vietnam to send a message to the Communist regime in Hanoi. But in wartime, the deaths of the
others don’t count; it’s only the deaths of our own, and I think that we see this within our own society. We mourn only for our own and the massive numbers of innocent, unarmed Iraqis who have died are not even a blip on our radar screen, and I think that is part of the sickness of a wartime society.

**Spiegel:** Can we talk a little more about what it does to us to dehumanize the enemy—to discount and ignore the damage we’re inflicting on the enemy. We talked some about that in terms of forming relationships, but as a society, what it is doing to us?

**Swofford:** The society allows that killing. It allows that estimate of 650,000 dead to come out and, as Chris said, not really make a blip on the radar screen.

**Spiegel:** So we’re deadening ourselves as we’re killing.

**Swofford:** I think we are deadening ourselves. We allow death.

**Spiegel:** Do you think there’s any such thing as a just war, having been through the experiences you’ve been through? What do you think? Is there ever a reason to do it?

**Hedges:** I don’t believe in the concept of just war. I think some wars are inevitable. I think that if you were living in Sarajevo during the siege that had been set up by the Serbs, all you had to do was look at the Drina Valley or Vukavar or Mostar to know what would happen if the Serbs punched through the lines. There was a World War I quality to the siege of Sarajevo; we were literally protected by trench systems around the city, even to the point where some crazy Muslim commander would decide that they were going to retake 100 yards by the Jewish cemetery and set up starbursts and the machine guns would go off and these poor kids would climb up out of these trenches stumbling through the shell-pocked pits of the graveyard with the bodies coming out of the coffins and get mowed down. I think that if you lived in that environment, to sit in a basement with Sarajevans and start talking about pacifism would have evoked gales of laughter. One understands why people pick up a weapon to protect their family, their neighborhood, their city, especially when the alternative is either life in a refugee or displacement camp or death. And of course, with the Serbs in the Drina Valley, a lot of those people were killed and women taken off to rape camps, and then after they got bored with them, they were shot through the head and their bodies dumped in the Drina River. But that doesn’t save you from the poisonous effects of war. So the first people who organized the defenses of Sarajevo came from the criminal class. They were the gangsters and others who had a penchant for violence and access to weapons. And when they weren’t hauling off the Serbs at the improvised barricades in the initial days of the war, they were storming up the steps of apartments and looting the apartments of ethnic Serbs who remained in the city and often killing them. So once you employ violence, even for a supposedly just cause, you become tainted, corrupted, and perverted by it. And that, of course, is why war is always tragic.

**Spiegel:** Somebody once said that we have met the enemy and he is us, and I think this has been a very compelling examination of the terrible effects of war on the physical
victims but also on the warriors, and I think, Chris and Tony, that what you are doing to try and bring truth to the mythology of war is an example of what in mankind is better—what we can do to try and think about life differently, and I appreciate it and thank you both for doing that. [Applause]

It is now time for us to entertain brief questions or comments.

**Question from the Audience:** For the past 17 years, I have been providing clinical support to refugee survivors of torture, and I’ve long thought that a country that could induce women to torture would have passed a certain very important mark. And the United States has done it. It takes away from the victim the hope that there is some group, particularly women, after torture who might restore them for the same reason the torturers began to dress in white coats and pose as doctors. You couldn’t go back to medical resources after torture. I wonder if you have thought about why now American women are in the military in combat and whether the appeal to them is the same as it is to men.

**Hedges:** First of all, I don’t think women are immune to that seduction of violence and even torture. Marguerite Duras’s great book *The War* describes picking up a German officer at the end of the occupation of Paris and her part in torturing him in a basement. It’s a very brutal scene of torture, and by the end you come to hate and feel disgust for the people carrying out the torture, but she was certainly part of it. In the war in El Salvador, we had women who were commandantes; you certainly had female guards who were involved in sadistic behavior and killing in the death camps. I think this division is less between genders and more between those who are parents and those who are not. Once I had a child…. The first war I covered as a father was the first Persian Gulf War, and I was never able to see the body of a child again and not think of my own child. I remember going to a funeral in Kosovo where a Kosovar Albanian had been killed. I was in the house and the body was there and this little 7- or 8-year-old boy kept pulling out a picture of his father from his wallet and looking at it. And all I wanted to do was flee. All I wanted to do was go home to my own child. I don’t think that it’s any accident that during the My Lai massacre, the only officer (who recently died) was a 20-year-old helicopter pilot who was a father and who landed his helicopter and actually ordered the gunner to aim the gun at American troops while he rescued a Vietnamese mother and four children. So I think that certainly there is cultural conditioning and the fact that women are often excluded from the military, but I have certainly seen examples where women have become as intoxicated as men both in terms of killing and in terms of torture. But I think once you are a parent and you understand the fragility of human life and the sanctity of human life, it becomes a lot harder to get wrapped up in that enterprise of death and it becomes a lot harder to look at human suffering, especially the suffering of children, and not think of your own children.

**Swofford:** I spoke to a marine general the other day who is the father of six and is a career man. I think there’s quite a tradition of combatants also having large families.
Hedges: I think it may be much more difficult for a father or a mother to see what happens after the killing or to witness the killing.

Swofford: Yes. You’re certainly correct, but the question becomes, What kind of a father are they? How much are they at home? Is their life invested in the military? In their relationship with their children, do they carry that machismo of the military back into the house? I think they do.

Hedges: It’s a really good point. I think that a lot of that means that you have to have that sensitivity toward the child. And the people who I’ve found are often the best or the people most able to cope with combat are people who have a hard time feeling much of anything. The more you feel or the more you’re capable of feeling, the harder it is. So yes, I think Tony’s right: it does depend on what kind of a parent you are. But for me, I think that at least when you’re a good parent, it becomes a lot harder to be in a war zone.

Swofford: At dinner, David and I spoke about the passing on of trauma, and I think the worst parent can pass the trauma on.

Spiegel: I think that’s true. I think one of the other disturbing parts of this discussion is what the historian Hannah Arendt called the banality of evil—that unfortunately it is too easy for ordinarily good people to do very bad things under the right or wrong circumstances, and that’s what’s disturbing, so women, parents, many people you would think would never do it wind up doing it.

Hedges: That’s the worst piece of knowledge you carry out of a war zone: that it’s so easy to make most people commit an atrocity. It’s what Primo Levi struggled with. That line between the victim and the victimizer is razor thin, and when you get the humanity of the guard at Auschwitz, when you understand your own reflection in his face, that’s a terrible dark knowledge to have to carry away. It’s certainly something that most people outside of a war zone don’t want to face and don’t want to hear, but I believe it’s true. I think one of the great books that illustrated this was Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men: The Story of Police Reserve Battalion 101*, where these middle-aged fathers, not members of the SS or even the Nazi Party, often in their 40s, were sent off to Poland. The battalion commander would order them to go out and gun down… I think they ended up being responsible for the murder of 35,000 Jews, none of whom was gassed; they were all shot and dumped in the pits. And the first time this killing took place, even when the battalion commander offered the battalion the opportunity, with no recrimination, not to take part, only six refused. It’s a brilliant book because these people, because they were low level, went on trial afterward and we have detailed accounts about how this happened, but it rang very, very true for me coming out of a war zone. That’s what’s so frightening: how at best people remain silent and more people than we would like to think are complicit.

Spiegel: There’s a wonderful quote in your book where some general says that after 60 days of continuous combat, 98 percent of soldiers are crazy and the other 2 percent were crazy to begin with.
Hedges: That’s from a World War II study, actually, where they studied what happened. And after 60 days, 98 percent essentially went insane and the other 2 percent were already insane. Actually, to quote the study, they showed a predisposition—the 2 percent who were able to endure more than 60 days of sustained combat showed a predisposition to aggressive psychopathic personalities.

Question from the Audience: Mr. Swofford, I have a question about the film adaptation of your book. I read a review that rather paradoxically praised your film for depicting the tedium of war and providing an account where it’s not all excitement and blazing guns, but at the same time criticized your film for not having enough action. So I was wondering if you were concerned about the point that Mr. Hedges brought up that no good antiwar film should depict combat. Were you worried that the film adaptation of your memoir was going to provide the same kind of pornographic attraction to war that movies like Full Metal Jacket or Rambo provided in the ‘80s?

Swofford: I was worried and I’m not sure that for some viewers it won’t. It is in some ways void of the heroics and the grandstanding, but at the same time it is a young, attractive group of men going off to battle and comradeship is very important to what is portrayed. For my book, it’s very difficult for me to hear from a young man or woman who is 18 or 19 years old who says, “I read your book and I can’t wait to be in the Marine Corps.” That shocks me. Though I also hear from people who say, “I was thinking about joining the Marine Corps and I read your book, and now I’m going to college,” which is the effect that I would prefer.

Question from the Audience: I’m a West Point graduate, class of 1968. I’ll let that sink in for a second. I just want to say a couple of things. I agree with a lot of what you say and there are a lot of things I disagree with that I won’t get into. Very quickly, I was one of the few people—I won’t say few, but I guess in this environment here—probably one of the few people who actually carried a gun, slept in a hole for days on end, and came out alive and with all my limbs, and I’m very grateful for that. But the thing I want to get to is that after the war, within less than one year of leaving combat, I was at an Ivy League school, the University of Pennsylvania, where I came to realize that I was such a small minority, particularly in the degreed class at that time of people who had gone to war, and even a smaller minority who had actually fought in combat. And I see here a number of people in the audience who are from that era. But you think about what was going on in the country at that time, and the intensity of the protesting, the antiwar movement, and you contrast that with what’s going on now, and I’m somewhat perplexed by the absolute passivity of the student bodies at the various universities which 30 or 40 years ago were erupting. Thinking about it for a few minutes, I began to realize that in ’68, this was the pre-lottery draft. Every male in the country had the very real liability of getting drafted and within less than a year being in combat. And there’s a lot of motivation there to express your displeasure with what’s going on. You have a war now which is equally I’ll say futile, and I’m wondering what your opinion is of the attitude of the upper middle class, the degreed classes, and so forth, that basically have the attitude that, Well, this really doesn’t apply to me; I really don’t have a dog in this fight. I’ll read
about it in the newspapers, I’ll come to these little lectures, and so forth, but it really
doesn’t affect me. I’ll go on with my normal life, whereas 30-some years ago it was a
much different picture.

Swofford: There’s a reason that the professional military is today opposed to the draft,
and that’s exactly why: because more people would be affected by it and I think there
would be the motivation for protesting and it wouldn’t be a small minority. Chris and I
were talking about this at dinner. It’s the working class where the burden lands.

Comment from the Audience (continued): I wanted to say one thing as far as the
nightmares go. It took me about 20 years before I could carry on even a casual
conversation about Vietnam. If I did, I learned very quickly early on that if I had even a
casual conversation, it would launch into weeks, if not months, of nightmares that you so
well described. It takes about 20 years.

Question from the Audience: I was just thinking that one of the topics that you kind of
avoided here on the allure of war is that it’s an instrument of national foreign policy, I
believe. At least most so-called realpolitik thinkers always think that one way that a
nation expresses its interest is through threat of force and through actual execution of
wars. I understand that it is the policy makers in Washington or Moscow or wherever it
is, not the grunt soldiers who are down on the ground, which of course is what you are
emphasizing here. That’s point one. Point two is that it seems to me there would be
large differences in the extent of trauma that a soldier feels depending on whether he’s in
the air force and is 30,000 feet above the people he’s killing, or in the navy where all he’s
doing is sending food aboard, or whether he’s down on the ground, eyeball-to-eyeball
shooting people. There seem to be enormous differences in the amount of trauma you’re
going to get from those various cases.

Swofford: There is a book called *An Intimate History of Killing* by Joanna Bourke that
came out around 2000. The author studied the effects of killing at short range, medium
range, and long distance, and there was a correlation between the trauma and the distance
that one is from the trauma.

Spiegel: There is. There was an article in *Science* recently indicating that 19 percent of
Vietnam veterans had at some point full Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and 9 percent
currently have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. One of the criticisms of the study was
that not everybody who had PTSD was assigned to an immediate combat zone, and I
think some of that is because even at distances people have enough imagination to realize
what they’re doing and have that kind of reaction to it. I met a guy who was a navigator
in the air force in Vietnam, and he would get the red crosses on the roofs of hospitals
lined up in his radar and have the B-52s drop bombs on orders from the joint chiefs, and
he can’t live with himself about that. Now, he had no face-to-face contact with it. So I
think some of it is that, even by imagination and identification, as human beings we can
realize what it is we are doing and respond to it. And I think there are many people with
long-term, hidden reactions to it that we are only now beginning to understand.
Hedges: Yes, although I think there is some truth to the trauma being worse when you have to actually see people picking body parts out of trees. Those are visual images that you can’t erase. If you’re dropping bombs from 10,000 or 20,000 feet from above, there’s a sanitary element to war. One of the things I find interesting is listening to John McCain talking about the war in Vietnam. John McCain knows nothing about the war in Vietnam. I have nothing against him and his courage and all that, but he was either flying a plane or he was a prisoner of war; the actual experience on the ground was not something he had much contact with at all. And I do think that especially when those kinds of images become repetitive—when you have to deal with them on a daily basis—it’s pretty mind-blowing. I think it is easier to be away. Although you’re certainly right. I know even from the war in Iraq, by the time we got to Baghdad, we had lost the war because the way the U.S. military goes anywhere is to obliterate anything on either side of it. So if some guy was dressed in black three kilometers away in a village, some lieutenant calls in an air strike or artillery support, and that village doesn’t exist.

Question from the Audience: James Hillman writes in A Terrible Love of War that when George Bush talked about the axis of evil, that civilians all could imagine the enemy and basically the war started then. I was wondering if you could talk to that.

Swofford: I think Chris in War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning is very eloquent about our need as a society to militarize and to find an enemy, and that we come together with our neighbors when we’re at war.

Hedges: That was part of it, but I think what really whipped up the American public in the weeks before the war was, first of all, the fear—fear is a huge element; and then a celebration of our own power and a demonization of the other. What we say in this country about Muslims is patently racist, and for somebody who spent as many years as I did in the Arab world, grossly untrue. “They only understand violence.” This was the kind of garbage that they used to say about the Vietnamese. I’ve been in houses with parents in Gaza whose kids were shot by Israelis and the grief is as palpable as it would be in your house. There’s the notion that they don’t feel like we do. So I think there were many elements that combined that always do in a wartime society to exalt ourselves at the expense of the other, to denigrate the others as less than we are, and to revel in our own might. And the goal of all this is to get us to speak, which we now do, exclusively in the language of violence. That is the only language we now speak to the rest of the world. And in that sense, we are the mirror image of the people we are fighting against and everyone else is caught in between. We have become the enemy.

Question from the Audience: I guess you’ve actually started to address what is concerning me, which the professor brought up, which is the whole idea that we have adopted war as our basic tool of diplomacy. It seems to me that that’s our bottom line that we go in with, and maybe our top line, and how can we move away from that? How have we gotten ourselves in that predicament?

Hedges: I think it’s worse than that. I don’t think this administration practices diplomacy at all. Diplomacy is irrelevant. What they’ve done is adopted a corruption of
Leon Trotsky’s idea of permanent revolution; they have adopted the idea of permanent war. And just as Trotsky understood that permanent revolution was a way to create panic, fear, with those defined as the enemy to keep people constantly off balance, it was also a powerful and potent weapon that could be used domestically to cow domestic critics who questioned the sanctity of the cause of the revolution or, in this case, the war. And I believe that is their doctrine, which is why I am extremely worried about Iran. If that is their doctrine, then that makes a strike against Iran before the end of the Bush administration extremely possible. The question you asked: What can we do about it? Because of the complacency, the passivity, the collapse of vigorous media (coming out of The New York Times, I’m well aware of the kind of crisis that newspapers are undergoing), I think all we have left, as Thoreau understood, is individual revolt, which is why—and I’m about to write this story up, which will be in The Nation—for myself, if we go to war with Iran, I won’t pay my taxes anymore. I don’t know what else to do. [Applause]

**Question from the Audience:** I agree absolutely with what you just said, but I want to ask a question. I had a young friend who was morally and philosophically against the war in Vietnam. Then he was drafted, and was over there for a little over a year and he came home for a short vacation. He said, “I was totally wrong. We really, really need to be there.” After the war was over and he came back about six months later, I saw him, and he was totally against the war. He said it was a very grave mistake and I said, “But wait a minute. You came home and you told us it was really, really necessary to be there.” And he said, “How would I have survived if I didn’t believe that?” I would like to ask Tony, did you come across this at all in the marines or do most marines enlist as a marine or are you drafted as a marine?

**Swofford:** In the contemporary period, it’s an all-volunteer force, and what your friend said in Vietnam is true. It’s true today. The young men I saw in Bethesda last weekend were injured for something that—they will probably have to come to the really ugly realization—is kind of meaningless for soldiers to have lost the use of their legs or their limbs for. But today, sitting in Bethesda, they still need to believe in the war as do the people who are fighting right now in Anbar Province, say, where yesterday four marines and a sailor died. Some of those people will be opposed to what they’re doing—would not want to be there—and I think by now I’m hearing dissent within the ranks. I have a friend who is a major in the Marine Corps and has been over twice and has incredible problems with what’s going on and how the war has been fought. If he goes over again, he’ll have to believe in what he’s doing.

**Question from the Audience:** I’m an admirer of the books that both of you have written and I can imagine giving them to someone who is thinking about enlisting. Both of you have mentioned books that you think are powerful on this question, but do you have any others that you would recommend, either fiction or memoirs or works of nonfiction that you think college-age kids, in particular, should be reading? I’ve taught classes on war films, and there is this danger of the seductive power of the war film overriding any antiwar message that might be intended. I think there’s something of the same danger even with the best writing about war because we think of the two of you and the
tremendous authority that you bring because of your personal experience. That kind of authority is, in its own way, very seductive to young people who are thinking about getting at the truth about what war is or what it really means. Especially, can you think of any works that don’t fall into that trap or that negotiate that successfully?

**Swofford:** Well, the novel by Larry Heinemann called *Paco’s Story*, which is a Vietnam novel, deals largely with a vet returning and trying to live in the world after the rest of his platoon was annihilated and it is especially powerful and troubling. I think everyone should read it because there are young men coming home today who will live similar violent and troubled lives. There’s Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War*, which is a memoir. He was also a marine. Those are two books that come to mind.

**Hedges:** Again, I would push people to look at books written by people who are not combatants, although I love the books that Tony mentioned. I think that Elsa Morante’s *History: A Novel* is a great memoir of a woman, a single mother powerless in the midst of war. I like Olivia Manning’s *Balkan Trilogy* and Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Coup de Grâce*. I think they begin to step outside the armed entity in wartime and describe from the perspective of somebody who is helpless and potentially a victim or a victim, begin to uncover the darkness of war. Then, of course, *Johnny Got His Gun* and all of these memoirs that deal with the after-effects of war are helpful. But I think you’re right. I think that even in our own books that we’re we’re contaminated with that as well, and the point you make is a fair and valid one.

**Question from the Audience:** I read an editorial once by a soldier who had been in war. He was now back and he talked about watching his best buddy’s head be blown off while he was right next to him. And his closing comment in his article was that he felt that no one should be allowed to declare war unless they themselves had actually experienced war. Could you please comment on that, and perhaps this would lead into the fact you mentioned that only 8 percent of the time in the last 3,000 years have we been at peace. Could the two have any relationship?

**Swofford:** I think that to require that the commander in chief have been in combat is probably dangerous and is probably a micro-requirement to put on our presidency, and I don’t agree with that. Take Wesley Clark, who was a very popular almost-candidate for the Democratic nomination in 2004: I think he was a brilliant soldier, but I didn’t want him as a president because the thing that makes a brilliant combatant, a brilliant general, is not the thing that I think makes a brilliant leader of a country and probably not a diplomat, which is what we need more than anything else.

**Spiegel:** I agree with you, but I’ll take Eisenhower over Bush.

**Question from the Audience (continued):** I think the author of this article was really making the point that unless you had actually seen first-hand what it is to live with human misery, you should not be permitted to send other people to that misery.
Hedges: Right. But plenty of leaders, Adolf Hitler being most prominent among them, saw the human misery and only wanted more of it. You can walk away from combat pretty messed up. The Free Corps at the end of World War I that sort of terrorized Germany was made up of vets who came out of the trenches and could never fit into peacetime society at all and fed, of course, right into the Brown Shirts and the SS. What I worry about is that as this war goes on, and these people are traumatized and then re-traumatized, we’re going to see a kind of ripple effect within our own society. Because prolonged exposure to that kind of violence makes you unable to feel, and I think Tony and I got a taste of it and sort of came back from the dead. But some people never do, and those people have a lust for war even though they’ve come out of combat. Think of what the gentleman from West Point spoke of; it’s a long process toward the recovery of your own humanity even after a year. I know Wes Clark and like him and admire him very much, but I think Tony makes a really good point that…. I’m worried. I think one of the problems in American society is that we are so rapidly being militarized. Even great universities like Stanford are militarized. Princeton is militarized; the robotics department at Princeton is largely funded by the Defense Department. There’s MIT. So I think that there is a kind of creeping militarization. Let’s face it: for many people, war is big business and it always has been. I think that there are many pernicious elements in American society and economic interests. People who have a vested interest in war to make money are fueling where we’re headed.

Question from the Audience: I’d like to address this question to either of the gentlemen who would be interested in picking it up, and I guess I’d like to dwell a little bit on some of the dichotomies of war. You can be a war lover before you go to war, but if you get in one, you don’t really come out as a war lover. Let me position myself, if you can go back that far, as someone who took part, just having been in there as a grunt, in what they called “The Good War,” World War II. Of course, that’s being really well popularized by Hollywood these days. One of the elements of that war I don’t think has ever quite been resolved, and I share this with everyone here because it’s kind of a dilemma. Toward the end of that war after the capitulation of the Germans and the Nazi regime, those of us who were in Europe (I myself went from Wales into France into Germany), were assembled in a huge camp outside of Marseilles. It was a staging area, you might say. And of course by that time, you remember that we were also at war with the Japanese and they had quite a war machine, as you know, and they were ferocious enemies and they just didn’t surrender. We believed that the Japanese were just constitutionally built to die in war and especially die killing Americans. That’s the way it was. My hunch, looking around, is that probably less than 30 percent of the people in this audience remember the hatred that this country felt during the times of Iwo Jima and all of those Pacific islands. In the end, we dropped this terrific, wonderful weapon, if you will—the atomic bomb - which changed the world. And my hunch is that today, in reviewing that, we would say, Well, that is something we regret; we shouldn’t have done it; we could have done it in some other way; and so forth. Yet, I stood with probably thousands of men who were entering into hundreds of ships that were going for a naval war where we would have climbed up on the shores of Japan. The next day it was over. I want to tell you that the mothers of those soldiers, including my own, slept very well
that night. That was the dilemma. And we’re still dealing with something like that. How do you reconcile that with some of the points that you’ve made?

**Hedges:** Well, dropping a nuclear weapon on a civilian city like Nagasaki or Hiroshima is a war crime. There is no moral way to justify it. There were other ways to show the Japanese the power of the atomic bomb. There were plenty of atolls or islands that were unpopulated off of Japan, and I think that the notion that the slaughter of innocent civilians on that scale, and even in conventional ways with the fire bombing of Tokyo or Dresden, is somehow justifiable is, of course, the tragedy of the modern era. Even in World War II, far more civilians died in World War II than combatants. And that has come to characterize modern war, and I think that so much of the failure to understand the reality of modern war is that we don’t see war through the eyes of the majority of the people who suffer from its effects, which are the unarmed and the innocent.

**Question from the Audience:** It was a fine Saturday morning. I was a fresh grad student at Berkeley and I had a pre-assigned roommate from Omaha, Nebraska, who showed up and he said he was my roommate and he wanted some soap from me. It turned out that I asked him what he was doing and why he didn’t have any luggage with him, and he said he had just come back from getting some electric shock therapy at some veterans’ hospital and he was a combatant who had just returned from Vietnam. So I talked to him in general and gave him the soap and talked to him a little bit. All the people in the international house that I was staying in at Berkeley were off; it was a weekend. Across the room was Eric Schmidt, current CEO of Google, so I went to him and told him what was going on and said I was totally unfamiliar with the circumstances. We talked to him and he realized it was the wrong place for him so he moved out but his checks were coming in on a biweekly basis from the Veterans’ Administration. He lived up in the Berkeley Hills. For two or three years, I would go over and meet him at predetermined times, and I helped him culturally because I came from a different culture. The short question is: How much is a returning combatant dependent on the culture to get the kind of closeness and therapy to recover?

**Spiegel:** The Veterans’ Administration has done a lot to provide psychotherapy and other kinds of support for combat vets with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. But we’re social creatures, and what you have heard vividly tonight is that a lot of the experiences of war deaden people to social support. So the rate of destruction in marriages is very high, where the loss of relationships and forming new ones, as you saw, was awkward and difficult. So the process of repairing the social as well as the psychological damage is not an easy one.

**Question from the Audience:** I’m director of patients’ issues and advocacy for United Students for Veterans’ Health on campus. I’m planning to teach a course on veterans’ issues through the public, social, and biomedical perspective next quarter and hopefully plan a course in Washington, D. C., in the spring with students. What do you think my generation should know about the veteran experience and the current issues that face veterans today, and how should America treat returning servicemen and women from the Iraq war, and should that approach be different?
Swofford: I think that great changes have been made in how vets are treated upon return by the public and I think by the VA as well. You should read the books that Chris and I have mentioned and if you want to know what it’s like for young men and women who are your age who have been in war, you should talk to them. Soon they’ll be on campus with you. They’ll be 22 or 23 and they’ll be coming back to school and they’ll be trying to integrate. It’s a difficult task but I think by listening and asking questions, we can all assist.

Spiegel: I think it’s a hopeful note to end on that a young person like you is interested in engaging this problem and helping. We’ve sort of been to hell and back tonight. We’ve been looking at the worst that mankind can do and I think the redemptive part is that Chris and Tony are back here asking us to reconsider what we’re doing. It’s not like me to end a meeting with a quote from the Bible, but I can’t resist: “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

I want to thank you both very much, Chris and Tony. [Applause]

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Selected Bibliography of Cited Books and Films


Chris Hedges, Veteran New York Times War Correspondent and Ansultz Distinguished Fellow at Princeton

Chris Hedges was a foreign correspondent for nearly 20 years, working as the bureau chief in the Middle East and the Balkans for The New York Times. He was a member of the Times team that won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting for the paper’s coverage of global terrorism, and he received the 2002 Amnesty International Global Award for Human Rights Journalism. He holds a B.A. in English Literature from Colgate University and a Master of Divinity degree from Harvard Divinity School. He is the author of War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction. His other books are What Every Person Should Know About War and Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America. His next book, American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America will be published by The Free Press in January 2007. He lives in New Jersey.

Anthony Swofford, Author

David Spiegel (moderator), Jack, Lulu & Sam Willson Professor in the Stanford University School of Medicine and Associate Chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences

David Spiegel received his bachelor’s degree in philosophy at Yale and his medical and psychiatric training at Harvard prior to joining the Stanford School of Medicine faculty in 1975. He is a leader in the field of psychosomatic research and founder of Stanford’s Center for Integrative Medicine. Among his many highly influential research programs is a study of reactions to life-threatening events that led to the inclusion of Acute Stress Disorder, a new psychiatric diagnosis in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-IV). From 1976-1980 he served as director of Social Psychiatry and Community Services for the Palo Alto Veterans Administration Medical Center where, in addition to many other responsibilities at the School of Medicine, he is currently a physician and consultant.

Comments?
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