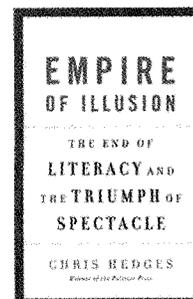


# Don't Worry, Be Happy

by Clark Stooksbury



*Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*

by Chris Hedges

New York: Nation Books

232 pp., \$24.95

**CHRIS HEDGES**, a former *New York Times* war correspondent, is not happy with the current state of American civilization, a view he makes crystal clear in *Empire of Illusion*. Hedges is an independent man of the left and a cultural conservative. *Chronicles* readers may recall the controversy over his commencement address in 2003 at Rockford College, covered by Scott P. Richert in *The Rockford Files* (August 2003). In that speech, Hedges delivered a harsh, unpopular, and largely accurate assessment of the coming occupation in Iraq. *Empire of Illusion* renders a similarly harsh assessment of the state of American culture in 2009.

*Empire* is a scattershot look at a variety of topics ranging from the porn industry to elite education. Hedges believes that Americans have forsaken reality for a world of lies and empty entertainment. Some of the more troubling results are plain—a series of disastrous foreign wars and a collapsing economy. The major problems we currently face were avoidable, had people paid attention to calls for military restraint and to questions regarding the ability of the housing market to rise indefinitely. In Hedges' view, Americans are as distracted by fantasy as those who view the shadows on the wall

of Plato's cave:

those who manipulate the shadows that dominate our lives are the agents, publicists, marketing departments, promoters, script writers, television and movie producers, advertisers, video technicians, photographers, . . . pollsters, public announcers, and television news personalities who create the vast stage for illusion.

"[N]othing," Hedges claims, "is off-limits, including death. As long as it can be packaged and turned into drama, it works."

As to higher education, "elite universities disdain honest intellectual inquiry, which is by its nature distrustful of authority." Hedges is particularly critical of the results of specialization, and of the dense jargon that characterizes it, recalling his inability to decipher the meaning of a fellow graduate of the Harvard Divinity School, though he shared her academic training. Of such as she, he insists,

[b]y any standard comprehensible within the tradition of Western Civilization . . . these people are illiterate. They cannot recognize the vital relationship between power and morality. They have forgotten, or never knew, that moral traditions are the

product of civilization.

Another jargon-laden field ridiculed by Hedges is "Positive Psychology." As he describes it, Positive Psychology is a scheme to manufacture happiness out of thin air and institutionalize conformity. Happiness is a slippery concept and difficult to measure, but government agencies, schools, and corporations have adopted the techniques of various Positive Psychology gurus. Hedges, comparing adherents to Positive Psychology with the addled denizens of Huxley's *Brave New World*, concludes that

the awful feeling that being positive may not, in fact, work if one is laid off or becomes sick must be suppressed. Here, in the land of happy thoughts, there are no gross injustices, no abuses of authority, no economic and political systems to challenge, and no reason to complain. Here, we are all happy.

In respect of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, major media outlets often served as stenographers to sources within the Bush administration. Judith Miller, who worked at the *New York Times* (Hedges' former paper), admitted, according to Hedges, that her work was "only as good as [her] sources." Hedges counters that reporters should "always begin with the assumption that those

in power have an agenda and are rarely bound to the truth." That statement is true of government at all times, but it is especially applicable to the Bush administration's campaign to sell the Iraq war in 2002 and 2003.

In those heady days, President Bush and his subordinates filled the airwaves, the newspapers, and the World Wide Web with lies, innuendos, half-truths, and hysterical fear-mongering about mushroom clouds rising above America's towns and cities. Bush-administration officials earnestly counseled Americans to have plenty of duct tape and plastic sheeting on hand in preparation for Saddam's terror attacks. But when the dust settled, Americans found that they had once again been sold a bill of goods. The former dictator who was fished out of a spider hole and deloused was obviously no threat to the United States, and,

while violence has subsided over the last two years, the United States is still mired in an expensive and bloody occupation of Iraq. The arguments against invading Iraq were complex and nuanced, while the case for war was as simple as shouting, "Go team!" The shouters prevailed, as they likely will again when citizens of what Gore Vidal dubbed the "United States of Amnesia" have forgotten about the current conflict.

Hedges argues that

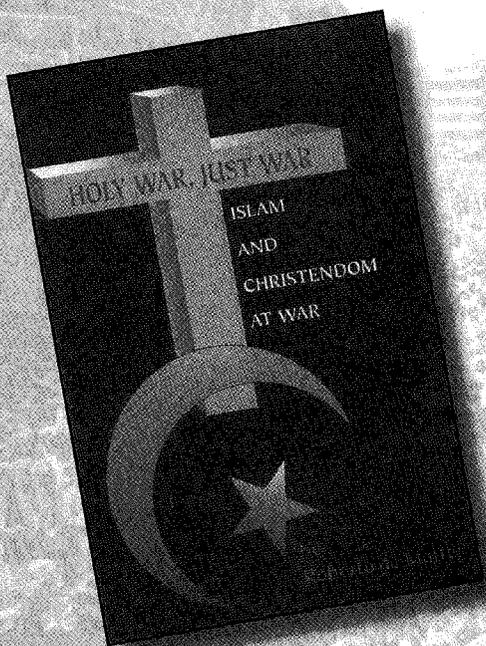
[t]he more we sever ourselves from a literate, print-based world, a world of complexity and nuance, a world of ideas, for one informed by comforting, reassuring images, fantasies, slogans, celebrities and a lust for violence, the more we are destined to implode.

The country faces spiraling debt, seemingly endless wars, and environmental decay, to name only a few of our serious problems; but our political culture is unable to hold a serious discussion about them. Politicians aspire to say as little possible in a substantive way, and the media are bound by their obeisance to corporate interests and p.c. pieties. There is no indication that the American appetite for "complexity and nuance" is increasing.

Although he foresees a "Weimar America," characterized by debt and decline, on the horizon, Hedges closes with a modicum of optimism. "Hope exists. It will always exist. It will not come through nation-states, but it will prevail, even if we as distinct individuals and civilizations vanish."

Clark Stooksbury writes from Knoxville, Tennessee.

FROM CHRONICLES PRESS



# Holy War, Just War

Islam and Christendom at War

by Roberto de Mattei

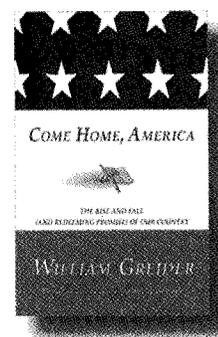
*"The term 'clash of civilizations' is not a palatable one in political and media circles," writes Roberto de Mattei, but it is the only proper framework for understanding how the fundamental theological differences between Christianity and Islam inform the way their adherents wage war. In this important work, he explains these differences with careful scholarship and defends with eloquence the "lawfulness of war against an enemy who is attacking the West, with the aim of establishing a moral and social order that is radically opposed to our history and tradition."*

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# Populist Reveries

by H.A. Scott Trask



*Come Home, America: The Rise and Fall (and Redeeming Promise) of Our Country*  
by William Greider  
New York: Rodale  
328 pp., \$25.95

**MR. GREIDER IS** a hopeful man. Although he believes the United States is in deep trouble, “deeper than many people suppose and the authorities want to acknowledge,” he also believes the country is on the cusp of a second populist uprising, which will force elites to confront the perils of globalism, militarism, economic inequality, ecological crisis, and debt. He admits that his friends regard his optimism as “delusional.” The reader may be forgiven for drawing the same conclusion after studying his persuasive argument for national decline and democratic corruption.

Consider his major theme: “Come home, America. Instead of trying to run the world, let us tend our own wounded society.” The advice is sound, but his expectation that “the people” will demand it be done is not. There is no evidence whatsoever for such an isolationist revival, but rather than deal with what that means, Greider retreats into bombastic self-assertion: “I reject the notion that the United States has evolved into an imperial state, that it is no longer a democracy.” Yet is not a country (and here I paraphrase Greider) that neglects its own interests in order to run the world an empire by definition?

If we are what we are, then we have a problem—actually two. First, we cannot afford global domination. As Greider points out, “the U.S. economic engine is running on empty, borrowing vast sums of capital from abroad every year,” and “the nation as a whole is sliding into dangerous debtor’s dependency.” The twin deficits of the 1980’s (trade and budget) have never gone away; in fact, they are worse than ever. For fiscal year 2009, the federal-budget deficit will surpass one trillion dollars, and it is expected to be as large in 2010. The country continues to pile debt upon debt. Unlike Obama, Greider realizes that we cannot continue to maintain global constabulary forces, wage multiple wars, and engage in nation-building, while simultaneously spending billions at home rebuilding and modernizing our transportation networks, developing new energy sources, and reviving our manufacturing base. We have to choose, but Americans don’t like that. This points to a problem of national character that Greider does not see.

What imperial state in history has ever relinquished its empire as a matter of free choice, instead of being forced to do so by some combination of catastrophic military defeat, demographic exhaustion, and financial collapse? As long as foreigners continue to buy our treasuries, the imperial game will go on. Richard Holbrooke has declared that a stable and democratic Pakistan is vital to U.S. national security; Hillary Clinton, that promoting de-

mocracy is a major aim of U.S. foreign policy; and Bob Gates, that failure in Afghanistan (meaning getting out of there) is not an option. So much for change we can believe in.

Greider dedicates his book to Lawrence Goodwyn, the historian of populism. Greider himself is descended on his mother’s side from Scots-Irish farmers in western Pennsylvania. He is one of those rare reporters who has not been captured by his sources (*i.e.*, corrupted by his proximity to power and money), and he has written about those issues that have always concerned populists: overseas military adventures, banking and the money supply, trade and tariffs, and democratic procedures. His 1989 best seller, *Secrets of the Temple: How the Federal Reserve Runs the Country*, is selling again. His *Who Will Tell the People: The Betrayal of American Democracy* (1992) details the betrayal of the American middle class by a plutocratic elite. In *One World, Ready or Not: The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism* (1997), Greider explains how the fraud of “free trade” is driving down wages and driving out manufacturing. Here is a reversal. In the past, populists, being mostly farmers, benefited from low tariffs; today, being salaried workers, they require protection from the Darwinian “race to the bottom,” the unceasing search by corporations for a cheaper market in labor.

Greider blames NAFTA but also the Federal Reserve, accusing it of “targeting the wages of working people.” But he