

The Treason of the Intellectuals

Written by Chris Hedges
Sunday, 14 April 2013 15:49



The rewriting of history by the power elite was painfully evident as the nation marked the 10th anniversary of the start of the Iraq War. Some claimed they had opposed the war when they had not. Others among “Bush’s useful idiots” argued that they had merely acted in good faith on the information available; if they had known then what they know now, they assured us, they would have acted differently. This, of course, is false. The war boosters, especially the “liberal hawks”—who included Hillary Clinton, Chuck Schumer, Al Franken and John Kerry, along with academics, writers and journalists such as [Bill Keller](#) , [Michael Ignatieff](#) , [Nicholas Kristof](#) , [David Remnick](#)

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[Fareed Zakaria](#)

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[Michael Walzer](#)

,
[Paul Berman](#)

,
[Thomas Friedman](#)

,
[George Packer](#)

,
[Anne-Marie Slaughter](#)

,
[Kanan Makiya](#)

and the late

[Christopher Hitchens](#)

—did what they always have done: engage in acts of self-preservation. To oppose the war would have been a career killer. And they knew it.

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These apologists, however, acted not only as cheerleaders for war; in most cases they ridiculed and attempted to discredit anyone who questioned the call to invade Iraq. Kristof, in *The New York Times*, [attacked the filmmaker](#) Michael Moore as a conspiracy theorist and wrote that anti-war voices were only polarizing what he termed “the political cesspool.” Hitchens said that those who opposed the attack on Iraq “do not think that Saddam Hussein is a bad guy at all.” He called the typical anti-war protester a “blithering ex-flower child or ranting neo-Stalinist.” The halfhearted mea culpas by many of these courtiers a decade later always fail to mention the most pernicious and fundamental role they played in the buildup to the war—shutting down public debate. Those of us who spoke out against the war, faced with the onslaught of right-wing “patriots” and their liberal apologists, became pariahs. In my case it did not matter that I was an Arabic speaker. It did not matter that I had spent seven years in the Middle East, including months in Iraq, as a foreign correspondent. It did not matter that I knew the instrument of war. The critique that I and other opponents of war delivered, no matter how well grounded in fact and experience, turned us into objects of scorn by a liberal elite that cravenly wanted to demonstrate its own “patriotism” and “realism” about national security. The liberal class fueled a rabid, irrational hatred of all war critics. Many of us received death threats and lost our jobs, for me one at *The New York Times*. These liberal warmongers, 10 years later, remain both clueless about their moral bankruptcy and cloyingly sanctimonious. They have the blood of hundreds of thousands of innocents on their hands.

The power elite, especially the liberal elite, has always been willing to sacrifice integrity and truth for power, personal advancement, foundation grants, awards, tenured professorships, columns, book contracts, television appearances, generous lecture fees and social status. They know what they need to say. They know which ideology they have to serve. They know what lies must be told—the biggest being that they take moral stances on issues that aren’t safe and anodyne. They have been at this game a long time. And they will, should their careers require it, happily sell us out again.

[Leslie Gelb](#), in the magazine *Foreign Affairs*, spelled it out after the invasion of Iraq.

“My initial support for the war was symptomatic of unfortunate tendencies within the foreign policy community, namely the disposition and incentives to support wars to retain political and professional credibility,” he wrote. “We ‘experts’ have a lot to fix about ourselves, even as we ‘perfect’ the media. We must redouble our commitment to independent thought, and embrace, rather than cast aside, opinions and facts that blow the common—often wrong—wisdom apart. Our democracy requires nothing less.”

The moral cowardice of the power elite is especially evident when it comes to the plight of the

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Palestinians. The liberal class, in fact, is used to marginalize and discredit those, such as Noam Chomsky and [Norman Finkelstein](#), who have the honesty, integrity and courage to denounce Israeli war crimes. And the liberal class is compensated for its dirty role in squelching debate.

“Nothing in my view is more reprehensible than those habits of mind in the intellectual that induce avoidance, that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principled position, which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take,” wrote the late [Edward Said](#)

“You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; you want to keep a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate; your hope is to be asked back, to consult, to be on a board or prestigious committee, and so to remain within the responsible mainstream; someday you hope to get an honorary degree, a big prize, perhaps even an ambassadorship.”

“For an intellectual these habits of mind are corrupting par excellence,” Said went on. “If anything can denature, neutralize, and finally kill a passionate intellectual life it is the internalization of such habits. Personally I have encountered them in one of the toughest of all contemporary issues, Palestine, where fear of speaking out about one of the greatest injustices in modern history has hobbled, blinkered, muzzled many who know the truth and are in a position to serve it. For despite the abuse and vilification that any outspoken supporter of Palestinian rights and self-determination earns for him or herself, the truth deserves to be spoken, represented by an unafraid and compassionate intellectual.”

[Julien Benda](#) argued in his 1927 book “The Treason of Intellectuals”—“*La Trahison des Clercs*”—that it is only when we are *not* in pursuit of practical aims or material advantages that we can serve as a conscience and a corrective. Those who transfer their allegiance to the practical aims of power and material advantage emasculate themselves intellectually and morally. Benda wrote that intellectuals were once supposed to be indifferent to popular passions. They “set an example of attachment to the purely disinterested activity of the mind and created a belief in the supreme value of this form of existence.” They looked “as moralists upon the conflict of human egotisms.” They “preached, in the name of humanity or justice, the adoption of an abstract principle superior to and directly opposed to these passions.” These intellectuals were not, Benda conceded, very often able to prevent the powerful from “filling all history with the noise of their hatred and their slaughters.” But they did, at least, “prevent the laymen from setting up their actions as a religion, they did prevent them from thinking themselves great men as they carried out these activities.” In short, Benda asserted, “humanity did evil for two thousand years, but honored good. This contradiction was an honor to the human species, and formed the rift whereby

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civilization slipped into the world.” But once the intellectuals began to “play the game of political passions,” those who had “acted as a check on the realism of the people began to act as its stimulators.” And this is why Michael Moore is correct when he blames The New York Times and the liberal establishment, even more than George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, for the Iraq War.

“The desire to tell the truth,” wrote [Paul Baran](#), the brilliant Marxist economist and author of “The Political Economy of Growth,” is “only *one* condition for being an intellectual. The other is courage, readiness to carry on rational inquiry to wherever it may lead ... to withstand ... comfortable and lucrative conformity.”

Those who doggedly challenge the orthodoxy of belief, who question the reigning political passions, who refuse to sacrifice their integrity to serve the cult of power, are pushed to the margins. They are denounced by the very people who, years later, will often claim these moral battles as their own. It is only the outcasts and the rebels who keep truth and intellectual inquiry alive. They alone name the crimes of the state. They alone give a voice to the victims of oppression. They alone ask the difficult questions. Most important, they expose the powerful, along with their liberal apologists, for what they are.

Source

Chris Hedges, whose column is published Mondays on Truthdig, spent nearly two decades as a foreign correspondent in Central America, the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans. He has reported from more than 50 countries and has worked for The Christian Science Monitor, National Public Radio, The Dallas Morning News and The New York Times, for which he was a foreign correspondent for 15 years.

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