



2008.07.08

**Chris Hedges and Laila Al-Arian, *Collateral Damage: America's War against Iraqi Civilians*. New York: Nation Books, 2008. Pp. xxxvii, 122. ISBN 978-1-56858-373-0.**

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A book that is neither easy to read nor easy to classify, *Collateral Damage* starts with its conclusion, organizes its chapters by typical U.S.-Iraqi contacts such as traffic checkpoints, and then culls through the memories and opinions of fifty self-selected American veterans who experienced such contacts. The author focuses not on Iraqi civilians but on how and why American GIs acted and reacted in ways that killed, wounded, scared, and angered those civilians.

From the start, questions of bias float around the authors as well as the soldiers and Marines they interviewed. Laila Al-Arian, a graduate of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, is currently a free-lance journalist and a producer for Al Jazeera English in Washington, DC. Chris Hedges has degrees in English literature from Colgate and in theology from the Harvard Divinity School. He went into journalism instead of the ministry in 1983 and spent almost two decades as a foreign correspondent, mostly with the *New York Times*. He has covered wars in Central America, the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans, and was an early critic of the Iraq War and the press coverage of it.

The bias of the soldiers and Marines interviewed is a function of the authors' methodology. How to pick a manageable group of fifty veterans out of more than a million who have served in Iraq? The authors first asked Military Families Speak Out, Veterans for Peace, Iraq Veterans Against the War, and other "organizations dedicated to U.S. Troops and their families," for contacts interested in "the suffering of Iraqi civilians under the occupation" (xxxv). Later Ms. Al-Arian visited the 2006 Veterans for Peace conference and found more veterans who agreed to be interviewed. Finally, veterans already contacted referred the authors to others, resulting in "the critical mass required to identify the patterns of the war in Iraq" (xxxvi). Whether extensive interviews with the women and men so selected have in fact fairly identified the patterns of the war is left to the reader to decide.

The chapters describing each kind of contact (convoys, checkpoints, detentions, raids, and gaining civilian support) smoothly integrate the several views of different veterans and often use the unvarnished language of the troops. "So it was just like a no-nonsense attitude," said Sgt. Josh Middleton after two of his soldiers were killed, "We're not going to put up with any shit from the Iraqis, and everyone's coming home safe and sound" (69-70). Also authentic and accurate is the military terminology that the authors use. They know the difference between the SAW and the 240B machine guns, what a DD Form 214 tells you about a veteran's service, and what the Army's "Five S's" for handling prisoners of war mean. These chapters give the reader not only a whiff of the war but also evidence that the authors know what they are writing about.

The introduction is the part of the book that is not easy to read. In it, Hedges

summarizes his philosophy of war: it is a seductive, addictive, and useless void that batters and wrecks the women and men who live through it (xiii, xxx). He asserts this general conclusion but does little to develop or explain it. (It is covered at greater length in his first book, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*<sup>1</sup> but it is hard to follow there as well.) Similar but clearer, wiser, and more elegantly expressed thoughts on the nature of war are available in the work of J. Glenn Gray and Gerald F. Linderman.<sup>2</sup>

Hedges also summarizes in the introduction's opening paragraph his conclusion on the Iraq War, an "atrocious-producing situation ... [in which US troops] surrounded by a hostile population ... [quickly come] to view everyone around them as the enemy ... [while] the real enemy is elusive, shadowy, and hard to find" (xiii). The troops' rage at seeing their comrades killed "is easily directed over time to innocent civilians ... nameless, faceless ... abstractions of hate [who are] dismissed as less than human." Soldiers and Marines are pushed "from killing—the shooting of someone who [can] harm you—to murder. The war in Iraq is primarily about murder. There is very little killing" (xiii). And that difficult conclusion gives the book its subtitle, *America's War against Iraqi Civilians*.

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<sup>1</sup> NY: Public Affairs, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Respectively, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1959; rpt. Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 1998) and *The World within War: American Soldiers' Experience of Combat in World War II* (NY: Free Pr, 1997).