Some plagiarism serious enough to diminish our faith

Tom Palaima, SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN
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"To plagiarize is to give the impression that you wrote or thought something that you in fact borrowed from someone, and to do so is a violation of professional ethics."-- MLA Style Manual and Guideto Scholarly Publishing

The president of Hamilton College addresses incoming freshmen in September 2002. Talking about a mystery novel, he uses the exact words, without attribution, found in a review on Amazon.com. When this is discovered, he resigns.

A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist in a book published the same month uses, without citation, ideas and words from a Nobel Prize-winning author. When he discovers what he has done, he simply changes the wording for future printings of his book.

Plagiarism is clearly a serious problem. Otherwise, Eugene Tobin would still be president of Hamilton College.

Still, it is hard to know what to do about plagiarism. A recent article describes it as "a lie of the mind." But there are many kinds of lies, some serious, some trivial. Are there also trivial and serious forms of plagiarism?

"War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning" was published about the time Tobin delivered his fateful convocation. On Page 40, the author, Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times correspondent Chris Hedges, writes: "In combat the abstract words glory, honor, courage often become obscene and empty. They are replaced by the tangible images of war, the names of villages, mountains, roads, dates, and battalions." The phrasing and ideas are clearly taken from Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms": "Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and dates." Hedges does not cite Hemingway in his endnotes or bibliography.

In early June, I wrote to Hedges' publisher, Public Affairs, advising that the borrowing from Hemingway needed to be acknowledged. I did so after I learned that Hedges' controversial views on war were being dismissed, unfairly I thought, because of rumors of plagiarism. I also made the case that Hedges' plagiarism was inadvertent to my former student, Lt. Col. Ted Westhusing, who teaches at the United States Military Academy at West Point. His frank reply raises a crucial question:

" 'Inadvertent plagiarism'? Inexcusable, especially from a New York Times commentator, reporter and author. Do you know what this would garner Hedges in the circles I run in? If truly 'inadvertent,' and if Hedges were a cadet, he might be lucky to garner only a 100-hour 'slug.' That

is, he spends 100 hours of his free time marching back and forth in the hot sun in Central Area under full dress uniform pondering the consequences of his failure (a slug). If intentional, Hedges would get the boot. Kicked out. Gone."

Indeed, why should a professional journalist be treated differently than a military academy cadet?

After some confusing responses from Hedges' publisher, Hedges called me. Hedges later claimed that I misunderstood how he felt about the issues involved.

But the following points are clear:

Hedges attributed his unacknowledged use of Hemingway to careless transcription from his notepads, the same kind of "accidental copying" defense used by historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, who resigned from the Pulitzer Prize board in May 2002 after plagiarism was discovered in a book she had written 15 years earlier.

When he discovered his oversight, Hedges changed the wording of the passage. In the paperback edition, it now reads: "The lofty words that inspire people to war -- duty, honor, glory -- swiftly become repugnant and hollow. They are replaced by the hard, specific images of war, by the prosaic names of villages and roads." The original idea is still Hemingway's. The words less so.

When I asked Hedges why he had not simply added a citation of Hemingway to his original passage, he replied that he was concerned about increasing printing costs by changing the page layout. But a brief endnote citation would have been easy and cheap.

I pointed out that changing words did not resolve the issue of plagiarism. Hemingway is now unacknowledged on Page 40 in all copies of "War Is a Force" as the source for Hedges' ideas or words or both. According to University of Texas research librarian Shiela Winchester, more than 900 American libraries have purchased at least one copy of the book. Hedges stayed on message. The offending passage, in his words, was gone. But what about new readers who notice the original plagiarism or how it was disappeared?

Reactions from colleagues have ranged from the cynical: "What do you expect? He's a journalist," to laments that Hedges did not have better editors. But Winchester pinpoints why it matters: "The insidious thing about catching an author at this . . . is that it makes the reader doubt everything."

All this may strike readers, as it did Hedges' publisher, as a "pedant's pedant(ry)." After all, a professional historian defended the late Stephen Ambrose against charges of plagiarism by maligning "outside critics (who) worship those sacred quote marks."

Likewise, many professors at Hamilton College wanted to exonerate their president. One of them, Maurice Isserman, writes that he tried hard before deciding that plagiarism was inexcusable, because as an act of intellectual theft, it prevents students from acquiring

"ownership of the words they use." This is why institutions of higher learning take plagiarism seriously.

But what about outside academia? When public intellectuals like Stephen Ambrose or Doris Kearns Goodwin commit plagiarism, they are not merely stunting their own intellectual development or disappointing their professors.

By disguising the fact that they are not speaking in their own voices, they keep us from understanding how they arrived at their ideas, and they diminish our belief that their voices are original and worth listening to.

Historians and journalists, in particular, are like police officers assigned to protect for us the truth about the past and the present.

More than ever, we need honest cops. Plagiarism is one indicator that a cop is less than honest.

But, like bribes taken by real cops, cases of plagiarism vary in seriousness.

One thing is clear: If Hedges were a cadet at West Point, he would not have had the option of obscuring the wording of the offending passage. He would be marching back and forth under full dress uniform in the hot sun.

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For the record

This article uses:

* Maurice Isserman, 'Plagiarism: A Lie of the Mind,' The Chronicle of Higher Education 39:4 (05-02-03) B12-B13

chronicle.com/weekly/v49/i34/34b01201.htm

* Rick Perlstein, 'The Arrogance and the Ecstasy,' Village Voice Literary Supplement (May 2002)

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* Richard Jensen, 'In Defense of Stephen Ambrose,' History News Network (05-20-02)

hnn.us/articles/738.html

PLAGIARISM: Historians, journalists have special duty to protect truth