Some plagiarism serious enough to diminish our faith

By Tom Palaima

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 the 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" conviction. On Page 40, the author, Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times correspondent Chris Hedges, wrote: "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 battles.

"The lying and ideas are clearly taken from Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms": "Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow were obscene before 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

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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? Truly "inadventitious," 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 acknowledged 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 prose, not the poetry, 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 That Gives Us Meaning." Hedges does not cite Hemingway in his endnotes or bibliography.

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