Speaker disrupts RC graduation

A New York Times reporter delivers an antiwar speech that offended many.

By CARRIE WATTERS, Rockford Register Star

ROCKFORD — New York Times reporter Chris Hedges was booed off the stage Saturday at Rockford College’s graduation because he gave an antiwar speech.

Two days later, graduates and family members, envisioning a “go out and make your mark” send-off, are still reeling.

Guests wanting to hear the author and Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter are equally appalled.

And College President Paul Pribbenow is rethinking the wisdom of such controversial topics at future commencements. This is Pribbenow’s first graduation.

Hedges began his abbreviated 18-minute speech comparing United States’ policy in Iraq to pariahs and a tyranny over the weak. His microphone was unplugged within three minutes.

Voices of protest and the sound of foghorns grew.

Some graduates and audience members turned their backs to the speaker in silent protest. Others rushed up the aisle to vocally protest the remarks, and one student tossed his cap and gown to the stage before leaving.

Mary O’Neill of Capron, who earned a degree in elementary education, sat in her black cap and gown listening. She was stunned.
She turned to Pribbenow and asked him why he was letting the speech continue. He said it was freedom of speech. Pribbenow later said when people stop listening to ideas, even controversial ones, it is the death of institutions like 157-year-old Rockford College.

In tears, O’Neill left the ceremony.

Her husband, Kevin, sat in the audience with their daughter and was as indignant as his wife.

“This is a ceremony. ... The day belongs to the students. It doesn’t belong to a political view,” he said.

Hedges, a war correspondent, criticized military heroic ideals that grow during war. The fervor sacrifices individual thought for temporarily belonging to something larger, he said.

Hedges sympathized with U.S. soldiers. He characterized them as boys from places such as Mississippi and Arkansas who joined the military because there were no job opportunities.

“War in the end is always about betrayal. Betrayal of the young by the old, of soldiers by politicians and idealists by cynics,” Hedges said in lecture fashion as jeers and “God Bless Americas” could be heard in the background.

After his microphone was again unplugged, Pribbenow told Hedges to wrap it up.

Elinor Radlund of Rockford read Hedges’ book on war and was horrified at what she said was the audience’s rude behavior. She was indignant she couldn’t hear the speaker.

“They were not behaving as people in an academic setting, where you’re supposed to be open to a great many ideas,” Radlund said.

Pribbenow said Rockford College takes no political stance, but the job is to challenge students. He reminded audience members of the liberal arts college’s commitment to listening to other viewpoints.

It didn’t happen.

Spontaneous reaction led 66-year-old Gerald Kehoe of rural Boone County down the aisle in his first time to
protest anything. He was hurt to hear a verbal attack on the country. He attended Saturday’s commencement to watch his daughter graduate, the fourth from Rockford College.

Rockford College political science professor Bob Evans said it’s a reminder of the “raw edges of emotion” on the issue.

A student who rushed the stage could face reprimand although he still received his diploma.

“It’s important to go on the record that it’s inappropriate behavior,” Pribbenow said.

■ AUDIO: Listen to an audio track of the speech.

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