Speech continues to draw national reaction

New York Times columnist Chris Hedges was critical of U.S. policy in Iraq during his Rockford College commencement address.

By CARRIE WATTERS, Rockford Register Star

ROCKFORD — Opinions keep rolling in about a New York Times columnist booed from the stage at Rockford College.

Some from the left. Some from the right. Some bemoan a liberal media and others criticize a conservative one. Some call for freedom of speech, others call for debate on ideas — something unavailable Saturday at the college graduation ceremony.

People near and far are chiming in on the debate over Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Chris Hedges’ commencement speech Saturday. Hedges was heckled from the stage. His keynote speech about war and group-think fervor was trimmed to 18 minutes because of the ruckus.

Hedge was critical of U.S policy in Iraq and included references to the U.S. as an occupier, not a liberator.

A few students protested, and within three minutes Hedges was silenced by a pulled microphone plug. Once corrected, the college president urged the audience to respect freedom of speech. Audience protest grew with
About 600 e-mails have been received by the Rockford Register Star. More than 325,000 people have read the Rockford Register Star news stories on the Internet. The audio version of the speech has attracted 50,000 hits and the transcript 30,000 hits on the Web.

Here’s a handful of opinions from readers across the country:

* “I have heard that college students generally have been becoming more conservative, and, well, less sophisticated and aware of current events. Living near Harvard and MIT, I don’t get to see these trends. But I guess the dumb, bizarre behavior of Rockford’s graduation class indicates that the ‘Dumb and Dumber’ mentality does indeed exist.”

— **Bernie Connelly, Somverville, Mass.**

* “In many respects, I think it reflects well on the students and their families. After all, they didn’t tar and feather the speaker from The New York Times. Nor did they sit there like sheep or hinterland bumpkins and take his opinions.”

— **Michael Warder, Claremont, Calif.**

* I am dismayed at your community’s disdain for the freedoms which patriots have fought and died for over the past 200 years. I ask each of you in the community ... to contemplate what kind of country you want to live in. Do you wish to live surrounded by anger, hatred and fear? Do you want to spend your life worrying whether you’ll be shouted down by an angry mob just because you speak uncomfortable truths? Do you want to be led like lambs to the slaughter, content simply to know that your views are “approved” by the powers that be? Or would you rather live a life of intellectual challenge and open debate, thinking and contributing to the moral questions of our time?”

— **Chris Vincenti, San Francisco Bay area, Calif.**

* “Chris Hedges and Mr. Pribbenow (college president) should recognize 1960s-style campus protest and
Should recognize 1960s style campus protest and activism and appreciate it for the healthy, if heated, exchange of ideas that it is. Just because Pribbenow’s man is on the receiving end of the protest this time around doesn’t mean his students don’t appreciate freedom of speech.”

— Andrew Freeman, Raleigh, N.C.