Aurora Forum at Stanford University

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW ABOUT AMERICA IN IRAQ: A CONVERSATION WITH DAHR JAMAIL

Interviewed by
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Mark Gonnerman: Good evening. Welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director, and we thank all of you for coming out tonight for this conversation, “What We Don’t Know about America in Iraq: An Evening with Dahr Jamail.”

Tonight’s conversation is part of a five-part series that the Aurora Forum is co-sponsoring with Montalvo Arts Center entitled IRAQ: REFRAME. The series began in November with a conversation with Washington Post journalist Anthony Shadid, author of Night Draws Near: Iraq’s People in the Shadow of America’s War. Then, in November, we had an evening where we met three Iraqi artists who are living in the United States: Wafaa Bilal, Sinan Antoon, and Michael Rakowitz, who came and showed their work and talked about their work as a commentary on what is happening in Iraq and what is happening with Iraqis here in the United States. Then, last Monday, a week ago, we had a conversation on Iraq’s lost national treasures with University of Chicago archaeologist McGuire Gibson and Nada Shabout, who is an art historian and expert on modern Iraqi art and Arab aesthetics. And here we are tonight with journalist Dahr Jamail.

To begin tonight, I want to read a bio of Dahr Jamail for the people who will be listening to this as a Podcast. In the course of the evening, I think you’ll get to know him well, but I want to start here because it sets up the story that we’re going to be exploring:

Weary of the overall failure of the U.S. media to accurately report on the realities of the war in Iraq for the Iraqi people and U.S. soldiers, in November 2003, Dahr Jamail went to Iraq to report on the war himself. His dispatches were quickly recognized as an important media resource, and he is now writing for the Inter Press Service, The New Standard, and many other outlets. His reports have also been published in The Nation, The Sun Herald, Islam Online, and The Guardian, to name just a few. Dahr’s dispatches and hard news stories have been translated into Polish, German, Dutch, Spanish, Japanese, Portuguese, Chinese, and Arabic. On the radio, Dahr is a special correspondent for Flashpoints, which you can hear on KPFA, and reports for the
BBC, *Democracy Now!* and numerous other stations around the globe. His reports have recently been published in this book, *Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches From An Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq*. This book was recently named by AlterNet News Service as one of the best progressive books of 2007, listed right there with Jeremy Scahill’s *Blackwater* and Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine*, two books which set a context for the very textured reporting we get from Mr. Jamail’s dispatches.

I want to start, first of all, by welcoming you and saying how honored I am to be here on the stage with a truly courageous individual. I think it would be helpful for us in the beginning to hear your story: How is it that you got to the position where you’re traveling around the country talking about what’s really happening in Iraq? You were born in 1968 in Texas to a Republican family, and you stayed in Texas for college. You left after college and you started traveling around. What were you looking for?

**Jamail:** First, thanks for your very kind comments. I went to school at Texas A&M. I was born and raised in Houston. I left the state mostly because I really didn’t graduate college being on any particular career path and I just wanted to live in the mountains because I’ve always liked mountains. I’m not sure where that came from growing up in Houston, but I moved to Colorado and spent a couple of seasons working at Keystone ski resort basically for a ski pass. From there, I started to travel a bit, but I’ve always loved to write and I’ve always kept my own personal journal and written, even though at the time, of course, I wasn’t interested in being a war correspondent or publishing. But I did briefly go to grad school to get a master’s in English literature at a small school in Washington State, but I didn’t finish it because I ran out of money.

**Gonnerman:** And that somehow took you to Alaska to become a mountain guide.

**Jamail:** Yes, it was not necessarily [laughing] … it was definitely not a linear path. But in sum, through a detour of a couple of other jobs, in 1996 I felt again drawn to the mountains and I decided to move up to Alaska, again not on any kind of career path, but I just wanted to mountain climb, basically. So I moved up and I took various jobs to support myself basically so I could start working as a mountain guide and climbing on a regular basis. So that’s essentially what I was doing when the buildup for the war against Iraq started. I was working as a mountain guide and a volunteer rescue ranger for the National Park Service on Mount McKinley in the summers, and in the off-season, I was either working as a personal assistant to someone who is quadriplegic or doing other types of social work, and a little bit of freelance journalism on the side.

**Gonnerman:** I love the first line of your book: “The thundering explosion jolted me into consciousness.” It seems as though much of your story is about being “jolted into consciousness.” And that really began in some ways with the work you were doing with this fellow, Duane French, in Alaska. What happened so that that changed your mind, quite literally?

**Jamail:** It was the first job I took when I moved up there. I was just literally looking in the classifieds for work: How can I support myself while I spend as much time in the mountains as possible? And here was an ad for a man. It said, “Quadriplegic man seeking personal assistant. Must be willing to travel often.” I went and met him and we
hit it off personally and I started working for him. He was a political appointee. He was the director of the State of Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, so his job was to help other people with disabilities get and keep jobs, and he was definitely a political animal, a political appointee. I started working for him and was relatively apolitical myself—didn’t really pay attention to what the government was doing, for the most part, and certainly not too much attention to U.S. foreign policy. And he started grilling me about my politics: “Well, what are your politics?” I said, “Well, I guess I’m a Republican.” I showed the depth of my political understanding. I wasn’t familiar with any policies. And he started grilling me: “Why aren’t you a Democrat or why aren’t you an Independent? What are their policies that you disagree with? You must have been really happy under Reagan,” and this kind of thing. I became very frustrated because I couldn’t answer his questions. Then I said, “Well, it doesn’t really matter. I mean, what the government does doesn’t really affect us very much anyway.” And he said, “Well, you really think that?” This was in Alaska in roughly 1996. At the time, the state government in Alaska was looking at making some legislative moves that were going to potentially make it so that he would not have weekend funding for a personal assistant. And he said, “So, you think what they do doesn’t affect us?” He said, “Try this on for size when you go home this weekend: You stay in your bed from Friday night until Monday morning, you don’t eat, you don’t drink, if you have to go to the bathroom, that’s just how it’s going to be, and then you come back and tell me how the government doesn’t affect our lives.”

**Gonnerman:** Point made.

**Jamail:** Point made.

**Gonnerman:** At the same time, you were watching politics with him. You were looking at the news on the television. You were thinking about the actual events that were unfolding in the 2000 election and then the buildup to the war. And then you write a remarkable thing in your book: “Having had some experiences in freelance reporting, I decided that the one thing I could do was go to Baghdad to report on the occupation myself. I saved some money, bought a laptop, a camera, and a plane ticket, and armed with information gleaned via some connections made over the Internet, headed for the Middle East.” Well, there are a lot of things you could have done. [Laughter] And it’s very striking: “The one thing I could do was go to Baghdad to report on the occupation myself.” That’s remarkable. Why did that appear to be the only option?

**Jamail:** Well, that’s a good question, and looking back, I’m not really sure I can answer it. I was extremely angry and extremely outraged at the time, and a lot of that is because I really didn’t wake up politically and form an understanding of what is the government’s function and what is the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and what actually is the context for what’s happening in Iraq. So as I learned this and was discovering it myself and getting the correct information, we were simultaneously going through these amazing events in this country of, of course, September 11, 2001, and then what caused that and what did it lead to, and then of course the immediate drumbeat for Iraq. And seeing these events unfold in real time as I was basically educating myself about the global political context of all of it, I had this simultaneous idealism and naïveté going on that I think sparked an extra level of outrage in me. So I kind of reinvented the wheel and realized:
Look, this war would not have been sold to the American public if it wasn’t for the media basically falling down on their job overall, with a few exceptions, as journalists. And one thing I could do to combat the glut of information would be to go and see what was happening in Iraq myself and report it. It’s what came up at the time in that context.

Gonnerman: Could you describe the transition going from Alaska to Iraq?

Jamail: [Laughing] Well, I was scared to death. I had met an individual over the Internet who was basically in Baghdad blogging. He was a Lebanese man, and I was really appreciating what he was writing. He was painting a very clear picture of what was happening under the occupation thus far. I wrote him and said, “OK, how do I get into Baghdad? I’m this person in Alaska; I’ve never been to the Middle East. I don’t speak Arabic. I’m fourth-generation Lebanese on my dad’s side, but I don’t think that’s going to help me in Baghdad very much.” And he basically wrote me kind of a rough, Lonely Planetsque guide of how to get into Baghdad six months into the occupation. I basically followed his instructions. I bought a ticket to Amman, Jordan, took the bus he said to take down to a particular part of the city, stayed in the hotel he suggested, paying twelve Jordanian dinars a night, and then arranged to hire a car to go into Baghdad. Then he pointed out a particular hotel I should stay at. So that’s basically what got the ball rolling. And I was full of fear. Several times along the way, I was asking myself, “What am I doing?” Maybe there was something else I could have done instead, but by then it was too late. I had already bought the ticket.

Gonnerman: Let’s talk about fear and your relationship to it. How has it changed over this span of time? First you go and you’re there from November of 2003 to January of 2004—about nine weeks. How did you deal with the fear?

Jamail: Again, having climbed very extensively for about seven years before that and being in many crisis situations climbing … I’m not trying to make a direct comparison to mountaineering and being in a self-imposed crisis situation essentially in nature as opposed to the chaos and violence of occupation and war and the situation in Iraq. There is no direct correlation. But I did learn through my climbing experiences, especially doing rescues, that if a crisis happens, basically you just shut everything else off and deal with what you need to deal with to get through whatever is going on. So that came in handy. But it also ended up kind of setting the stage, and this is one of the themes of my book—post traumatic stress disorder—that it is very effective, as journalists or combat troops know, that when you’re in a life-and-death situation or a bomb goes off nearby or you’re being shot at, you shut everything else out and just deal with what you need to deal with. And that included the emotional aspect of interviewing people who had gone through crises themselves and just getting down the information. And then generally it was later when I would go back to the hotel, as the same thing would happen in the mountains: when you do a rescue and sometimes it’s life-and-death and then you go back to camp, then it hits you—“Oh, that was really close”—and then you have to process through that. So it was the same experience in Baghdad.

Gonnerman: And you had a lot of close calls, because soon after getting there, you start to go out and you’re learning just how to go out and how to meet people and how to get stories. You really didn’t have experience as a journalist when you arrived.
Jamail: I didn’t, certainly not this kind of journalism. The brunt of my journalism experience before going to Iraq was writing up mountaineering stories from trips I’d taken in Alaska or other places around the world where I would go climb. So it was a bit different, and I would simply go out and, from what I had read before I got to Iraq, I understand that there were already infrastructure problems and already problems of a lack of supplies in the hospitals, and this kind of thing. So I would go out and pursue information: Well, I’m just going to the hospitals to see what’s going on. And so I literally had an interpreter that I was paying twenty-five dollars a day and we would take taxis around to different places. And we would just go in and talk with people. I had made myself a press pass. I wasn’t affiliated with anything. It’s very easy to do. You go on-line and type in “press pass,” [Laughter] and there are thousands of examples and so you can just make one. And that’s what I did because in Iraq, especially at that point in the occupation seven months in, the state was essentially erased; there was no state when the regime was removed. So basically anyone with a lanyard with a piece of plastic and your photo in it hanging around your neck was: You’re official; whatever you want to be. So we’d walk up to a situation if there was a check point or perimeters and say “Press,” and you’d just get waved through. That was the situation, so that worked very effectively. And we would go in and interview people and rarely had any problems. We just hit the ground running and started working that way. Again, at the time, contrasted to how the situation is in Iraq today, I was taking taxis around by myself, we were staying in an unguarded hotel, there were no kidnappings, there were no beheadings—none of these atrocities were happening. So we were able to get around pretty well.

Gonnerman: In that whole stretch from November to January?

Jamail: Yes.

Gonnerman: What was your perspective on the reporters embedded with the military before you went and then while you were there?

Jamail: Before I went in, my perspective of unembedded reporters was quite negative. Just watching what I saw of, for example, the coverage of the invasion of these people—offering this one perspective as though it was the only perspective and as though there was no other perspective. And really, one of the primary motivators for me to go into Iraq was what’s happening to the Iraqi people. Embedded reporting is a great way to report on what is exactly happening to that unit at that particular time, but it’s also a situation—and I knew this prior to going in—that the embedded program set up by the Pentagon…. There’s always been embedded reporting, but not on the level, for example, that we had during the ’91 Gulf War. That was essentially the trial run. And the embedded program was set up as a means strictly of information control. And it was a wonderful idea and it’s worked almost perfectly where 90 percent of the reporters who do it want to come back and do it some more, despite that in many of the instances, if you’re going to embed, you have to sign a form giving the military permission to basically censor what you’re going to report. And, of course, by default it means they’re going to control what you see, when you see it, the angle you see it from, etcetera. So I knew that I didn’t want to do that and I knew that I wanted to focus my coverage on where the silence was, which was then, and is for the most part today, still what’s happening to the Iraqi people and how do they feel about this. And so I didn’t have very much respect for
people who would report while embedded and kind of wave the flag and give the Pentagon line. I mean, the Pentagon does their own press releases; they don’t need journalists to do that for them, and I didn’t want to be any part of that. Then I got to Iraq and saw embedded reporters and went into the Green Zone a few times to the military press conferences. We called them the Five O’Clock Follies, as they did in Vietnam, because you would get Dan Senor, the spokesperson for Paul Bremer, the head of the CPA, and Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, the military spokesperson, up there making these outlandish claims, kind of like what we have going on now. I was literally walking in off the streets of Baghdad after spending a day interviewing people about home raids, hearing about torture and this sort of thing (and this was on the first trip), and then coming in and hearing these glowing reports of how well everything was going, etcetera, and then seeing these mainstream reporters being called on, on a first-name basis, just like at the White House press conferences. So what I saw on the ground in Iraq didn’t provide any information that changed my previous opinion.

Gonnerman: Let’s talk about Fallujah. It’s a touchstone in your book, and from the very beginning of the narrative, in fact, as you’re going from Amman to Baghdad, you go past Fallujah and you’re warned about it and how dangerous it is. It seems to be a story that a lot of Americans don’t know very much about. Why is Fallujah important and why do you have an ongoing relationship with the story there?

Jamail: A couple of main reasons: First of all, the most obvious reasons are that I did end up spending a decent amount of time in Fallujah, and it was kind of a thread through my time in Iraq. Then, the things that happened when I went into Fallujah during the April [2004] siege, and then covering the November siege impacted me greatly. But another reason it’s a main theme of the book is that I feel like it’s a microcosm—a small example—of the occupation as a whole where, for example, if we talk about the April siege, there was no context given. For example, Saddam Hussein had troubles controlling the situation in Fallujah and basically maintained a hands-off policy with it to the extent that so many people in Fallujah didn’t like his regime, as evidenced by when the invasion took place, that there was no fighting in Fallujah. Not to say U.S. forces were welcomed warmly and invited into people’s homes, but they weren’t attacked, is my point. But three weeks into the occupation (I believe it was April 29, 2003), U.S. forces were occupying a school there and there was a demonstration outside, mostly by people of the city who had kids. They wanted school to be open the next day for classes, and they were fired upon and seventeen people were killed. And that essentially created the resistance in Fallujah, and a couple of other events like that that happened not too long after that reinforced it. So by the time I rolled into Iraq on my first trip, literally driving past Fallujah on November 24, 2003, there was a small military operation going on on the outskirts of the city, and we could see helicopters and people laying down with their guns drawn, and we knew it was very volatile already and the military was really struggling to try to figure out how to handle the situation. But the propaganda continued on to the point where, for example, just talking about the April siege by itself, if you watched most of the mainstream coverage of that (Day Zero for that was March 31, 2004, when the four Blackwater mercenaries were killed), there was really a demonization of the people of Fallujah: “Well, they’re Saddam loyalists,” and all of these really grotesque misrepresentations of what the actual situation was: calling the Blackwater people
citizens and this sort of thing rather than what they actually were, which now, of course, we have many examples of what Blackwater is all about. But really, the demonization, the propaganda, everything that then went into what would lead to cause to happen against the entire city—a city of 350,000 people—was really a micro-example of the whole occupation, of the demonization of an entire country as though there was only one guy in Iraq and it was Saddam Hussein.

**Gonnerman:** What did you learn by covering the April 2004 siege?

**Jamail:** It really, I think, was a baptism of fire for me in a lot of ways. First of all, the siege was launched on April 4, the day I went into Iraq my second trip, kind of by accident. It wasn’t necessarily planned. But literally, driving in we had to go around and find a different route around the city into Baghdad because the main highway goes right by the outskirts of Fallujah, and then Baghdad’s about another twenty minutes away. And the military was sealing off the highway and sealing off the main entrance to the city, so we had to circumnavigate it to get into Baghdad. We got in there, and they had launched the siege that day officially. And within a couple of days we were hearing reports of really horrible things—stories coming out of the city of the targeting of ambulances, cutting of supplies, cutting water and electricity, and not allowing any medical supplies in. So I had an opportunity to go into the city on a bus carrying humanitarian supplies. It was arranged by an Iraqi NGO in Baghdad. And on the bus there was me, a British activist named Jo Wilding, an independent filmmaker from San Francisco, David Martinez, and another British filmmaker, Julia Guest, and then several Iraqis, just to go in and take basically blankets, basic medicines, and antibiotics, and things like rubber gloves into the city. And we chose April 9 to go in because, according to the military and reported by a lot of the establishment media, there was a ceasefire on April 9 so that negotiations could be held. And yet, as we took the back dirt farm roads into the city, literally with our own eyes we were watching F-16s bombing different parts of the city and helicopters attacking other parts of the city. So it just a fundamental understanding of, OK, this is the level of propaganda and here’s what’s being reported and here’s what’s actually happening. That basically set the tone. We rolled up into the city and took our supplies to a small clinic and literally sat there in the clinic. And I spent a lot of time on this in the book detailing what I actually saw of women and children and elderly and some men from different parts of the city being brought in at different times by family members because the ambulances couldn’t run. They were all being shot at by snipers. And all of them were telling the same story, and that was, “Look, the Marines can’t get into the city; they push in as far as they can, they set up snipers, and they’re shooting everything that moves.” That’s exactly what we were seeing on the ground. That was basically my welcome into Fallujah towards the beginning part of that siege.

**Gonnerman:** And this is part of a pattern of collective punishment you talk about in the book. An incident happens in one place and then a whole community suffers. Did you talk to people in Iraq about that—this sense of being in the wrong place at the wrong time and having these kinds of repercussions when people didn’t have any personal connection to the precipitating event?

**Jamail:** That was common. I was seeing that from my first week on my first trip into Iraq, and this was at the end of November of 2003. For example, in December, 2003, I
and Christian Parenti, who writes for *The Nation*, and a couple of other journalists went up to Samarra. We just happened to be there on a day when there was a large military operation where they had sealed off a neighborhood because a patrol of striker vehicles had been hit by a roadside bomb a few days before. We had first gone to investigate that because the military literally came out a few days later and just leveled with bulldozers the home that was nearby where the roadside bomb went off that hit a Stryker vehicle and I believe it had killed a soldier. It was the definition of collective punishment. They had no proof that the people that did the attack had anything to do with this home, but there it was, and it was leveled. Then there we are a few days later and we find this operation that’s going through that entire nearby neighborhood looking for people to detain. And we were interviewing soldiers right there on the perimeter and they told us exactly what was happening. So that, and then going into places like Fallujah and Samarra or Ramadi, where literally the entire city was infuriated because they had had no electricity for three days so they had had no water for two days, or the military was trying to cut off medical deliveries into the city, or this kind of thing. It was commonplace, where anytime there was an attack or a series of attacks against the occupation forces, then there were these measures commonly imposed on cities where the entire city would be collectively punished exactly like you said. Certainly there were some elements inside the city likely to be responsible, but that is the definition of collective punishment, where you’re just imposing these policies that affect an entire city. By definition, that’s the same thing that happened to Fallujah in April and November of 2004.

**Gonnerman:** You quote someone who says, “Why are sixteen innocent people in Fallujah killed because four Americans were killed there? If the American army wants to stay in Iraq, they must kill all the Iraqi people.” With statements like that, you show the growing resistance.

**Jamail:** Right. It’s this vicious cycle. Like I said before, you could argue that the resistance in Fallujah was born as a direct result of U.S. military actions—of shooting into a crowd of demonstrators and killing seventeen people, in turning basically citywide sentiment against them. One incident after another of this sort of inciting behavior really sparked resistance against the occupation. And then, of course, there were basically bigger guns being used as a result of that to try to repress the resistance that was starting, of course then generating more resistance, and so the cycle goes.

**Gonnerman:** At the same time, in April of 2004, the Abu Ghraib story breaks. In your book, you tell the story of Sadiq Zoman, who had been tortured by the military, and having learned his story, you e-mailed editors at many newspapers in the United States. You said you sent out 150 e-mails with a short message about the story, asking them to come and cover this, and you did not receive a single e-mail or call in response. People knew about torture.

**Jamail:** This happened on my first trip. I came across this story in January of 2004, the context, of course, being the Abu Ghraib scandal. The photos being aired on TV here basically occurred in late April and early May of that same year. So we’re basically four months ahead of the curve. And it wasn’t just me. You couldn’t be out on the streets of Baghdad talking to people and interviewing people about what was going on for 72 hours and not hear about someone or someone’s relative or brother or friend that was in some
detention somewhere, and horrible things were being done like the use of dogs, cold water, electricity, sexual humiliation, stripping of the clothes, denial of food, and this kind of thing. I came across the story of this man, 57-year-old Sadiq Zoman. Basically, the context of the story is that he and his family were in their home in Kirkuk in August of 2003—so quite early on in the occupation—and he was detained in a home raid. He was a member of the Ba’ath Party. He was taken away and held by the military for a month, and then dropped off at the general hospital in Tikrit comatose. And he was dropped off by the U.S. military with papers from a U.S. Army medic, and I outline all of this. His name is Michael C. Hodges. The report basically says: Yes, he basically went into a coma because he had heat stroke, which led to a heart attack, and I did this and this and this to revive him, and here he is. You can deal with him, but we think this is permanent. And I had copies of that report. I had copies of photos and videotape of him as he was brought into the hospital and his first days. And what’s interesting about this report is it didn’t mention anything about the fact that the back of Zoman’s head was bashed in. He had electrical point burn marks on his genitalia and on the bottoms of his feet, one of his thumbs was broken, he had horrible lashes and bruises up and down his entire body, front and back, which may have had something to do with why he was in a coma. None of this was mentioned, of course. But, in sum, I wrote up a brief description of the story, and I was completely amazed that this wasn’t being reported. And I wasn’t reporting for anyone regularly at all the time, and so I literally just sent out an e-mail to editors of all the major newspapers here and as many other newspapers as I could find, and it ended up being about 150 e-mails to mostly foreign editors saying, “Look, here are the basics of this story. Just cover it. If anyone wants the information, I’m happy to share it, or they can go out and find any stories like this on their own. They’re everywhere.” And I didn’t receive one response. And as I note in the book, I wasn’t interested in covering it necessarily myself, but I was naïve enough to believe, or idealistic enough to believe, that this is going on and this is going to have a huge impact on the occupation and on Iraqi sentiment, and certainly spread shock waves across the Arab world, and no one’s reporting this. It’s happening right now despite the fact that it’s not being reported because everyone knows this. And it was, again, another big lesson in how the establishment media actually operates.

**Gonnerman:** When the Abu Ghraib story broke, can you talk about the effect that had on American credibility among Iraqis?

**Jamail:** Well, it was devastating, as I said. The absolute worst PR situation you could have to deal with was these photos, which are essentially war trophy photos, which is not a new thing. It happens in every war and it’s not exclusive to the United States. Photos, war trophies: we had them in Vietnam during the war with Japan and China. We can go through history, and war trophies, whether it’s body parts or photos or looting or whatever, is very, very common. And that’s essentially what these photos were. But it’s impossible to underestimate the effects of these photos when they came out and what that caused, not just in Iraq but across the entire Middle East, of the sexual humiliation, having female soldiers doing this to Iraqi men, to Arab men. And, really, it’s a situation that I don’t think it’s stretching it to say that if, for example, after those photos came out, there was a 180-degree change in policy of: OK, this has been systemic; the whole detention system is rotten to the core, we’re finding all these families and we’re
compensating them with huge amounts of money and we’re redoubling our efforts toward…. If all of that had been done, best case scenario, I think it would still take generations to recover from what those photos have caused.

**Gonnerman:** You leave Iraq, then, in June of 2004, and you start making presentations around the country about what you learned. Was that encouraging?

**Jamail:** At the time, it was very, very difficult. It was not encouraging to me at all, because still, in June 2004, July, August, public sentiment in this country was still kind of in the wake of the invasion and things weren’t going too bad just yet. At least, people could still believe that back here. Of course, over in Iraq, it was very clear that the occupation was already lost. There was no salvaging this. It’s very bad and it’s going to get a whole lot worse. But then coming back here still and giving talks to generally very, very small groups of people and really not having had still a whole lot of experience working in Iraq personally, it was very difficult. It was difficult for people here to understand even as I was showing photos and telling these stories, many of which we’ve already spoken about, to really impart to people how severe the situation is and where it’s going, and it’s going to get much, much worse and this is really just starting. People, I think, still really couldn’t grasp it because many people still had the idea that, well, there is still going to be this withdrawal and there is still the possibility that things are going to settle down and get better. So it was a challenging time. Plus, I was starting to try to cope with—and I didn’t know I had it at the time—but I had PTSD. I had post-traumatic stress disorder, and I had been through and had seen enough in Iraq that I was quite deeply affected, and I didn’t really understand or was certainly not able to kind of start to contend with how that was starting to affect me personally.

**Gonnerman:** Is the fact that you really didn’t understand one of the reasons you decided to go back?

**Jamail:** I think that that helped in making a rather snap decision that I wanted to go back and I wanted to keep on the story and continue covering it, especially because I was in a position to go back where, by then, I was writing for several outlets and knew that I could go back and have no shortage of work to do. But certainly, I think not really knowing the situation as well as I understand it today as far as post-traumatic stress disorder … I think that that definitely contributed to this want to go back. That’s why now it’s common when combat troops come back, and as horrible as the situation was or how many of their buddies have been killed beside them, they want to go back because in a situation like Iraq and other war zones, you kind of become normalized and socialized to that. That’s part of what PTSD is in order to cope, so that situation becomes more normal to you than this.

**Gonnerman:** We were at the Aurora Forum on November 4, 2004, with Amy Goodman and Larry Diamond for a post-election town hall meeting, and Larry Diamond said that night, “I think most people in this room know that perhaps within the next few days the United States may launch a massive military invasion of Fallujah. This would be a very, very bloody and total assault. If it happens, it will not be stopped early on as it was in April. In my judgment, it will not succeed in crushing the resistance because I think if you study nationalist insurgencies around the world, and we are facing one now in Iraq even if it is based in a particular part of the country, namely the Sunni Triangle, you find
that insurgencies are not defeated or diffused by purely military means. I don’t think this one can be crushed by military force. I think we need to look primarily for a political solution.”

You decide to go back because you, too, know that this is coming, and you leave on Election Day. Things had changed in the interim between April 2004 and November 2004 when you go back. What did you find this time?

Jamail: Everything Larry Diamond said is exactly correct. And this is information that even many military commanders on the ground in Iraq were saying even at that time. But I went in. It was really an amazing time in that I literally flew out of New York as election results were still coming in and then landed in Amman, Jordan, and was speaking with a woman who was on the phone talking to her father and found out the results and then knew, OK, the siege is on for sure. Everyone knew it was coming. And then preparing and getting ready to go on into Baghdad in early November—the siege was launched on November 8—and getting in there just a day or two before it started and being able to set up camp. And things were radically different in Baghdad as compared to my first trip and even early on in my second trip, where staying in unguarded hotels, taking taxis around by myself, and going out to eat at night was not that big of a deal as long as I used my head. But this time going in, first of all, you couldn’t drive into Baghdad. You had to fly because the road from Amman to Baghdad was by then completely out of the question if you were going to use it as a Westerner, and certainly as a journalist. And I flew in, my main interpreter, Harb, picked me up at the airport, took me straight to a hotel (a guarded hotel this time), and I got my room. And we had to radically change how we were working together. Gone were the days of just walking out the front door of the hotel and hitting the streets and starting to talk to people. But setting up preset times of when to meet, varying them every day so as not to be followed, using different cars, changing the way I looked … this kind of thing was the way that we had to start operating.

Gonnerman: Media repression during the second siege of Fallujah was intense, you write. Why?

Jamail: There was actually a story on this very recently where the military admitted that the lesson they learned in Fallujah in April of ’04 was: You have to control the information. And they failed to do that in April, because when people like me could get into the city and report on cluster bombs and civilians being killed and Al Jazeera having a camera crew in the city was devastating. The military—and this is not new, either—but they understand very clearly that winning the war of information is at least as important as winning the war on the ground. And in April, for example, during one of the truce negotiations they had with fighters in the city of Fallujah, one of the terms posed by the military was that that Al Jazeera camera crew had to leave the city. I mean, they understand the impact of images of civilian homes being exploded and women being shot and dead kids. I mean, you can’t have that out. And so they radically changed how the media situation was going to be with the second siege. So before the siege was even launched, a very, very strict military perimeter was set up around almost the entire city, and there were almost no journalists in the city whatsoever. Then, before the siege was even launched, Fallujah General Hospital, which is right across the Euphrates River from
the rest of Fallujah, was occupied by U.S. and Iraqi troops. They came in, they justified this hospital raid, which is a violation of international law, but they justified it as calling the hospital and the doctors in it as disseminators of terrorist propaganda—that they were inflating casualty counts, and this kind of thing, to do basically PR damage to the U.S. military. But they knew that they could not afford to have this information getting out because enough political pressure was drawn from that information during the April siege that that did have an impact on forcing the U.S. to close down shop for a while, at least in Fallujah. So this time they changed tactics. They had at this time an interim prime minister, Ayad Alawi, who is a CIA asset who proudly has announced in the past being affiliated with fourteen different secret service agencies of countries around the globe. So this is the interim Iraqi prime minister, who, as the siege was launched, issued a quote, the gist of which was to the media: Stick to the government line on Fallujah or you will face legal consequences.

**Gonnerman:** Do people know, as you write in your book, that 5,000 innocent civilians, “the majority of whom were women, children, and the elderly, were slaughtered in Fallujah in November of 2004. Five thousand innocent civilians who, under the Geneva Conventions, an occupying power is required by law to protect, died in what was essentially a free-fire zone.” Did the word get out?

**Jamail:** I don’t think so. I think if you read alternative media or watch Democracy Now! in this country, maybe you have an idea. Or if you read foreign media and some of the foreign newspapers like the Independent, for example, in the UK, maybe you have an idea. But I think overall the media tactic worked. I think you have to give them credit where credit is due, with the suppression of this kind of information and bringing in to the discussion just the two words, “Geneva Conventions,” or the two words, “international law,” and violations of those and war crimes, and certainly the use of white phosphorus and cluster bombs and this collective punishment. In the situation of Fallujah today, I think most people don’t have any idea of what happened there.

**Gonnerman:** We’re going to open up to audience questions and comments. If you have a question or comment to make, please line up behind one of the aisle microphones and we’ll bring you into the discussion. Before we get someone at the mic, though, I want to ask about the elections, because you stayed on then into January of 2005, and saw some real differences between what was happening with the elections in your experience and what was reported back here.

**Jamail:** Well, first of all, I assume that most people here tonight have a general idea that most establishment media reportage of the January 2005 elections in Iraq where they were praised as this huge success and Condi Rice out the gate before they were even finished voting in Baghdad was claiming 70 percent turn-out and this kind of thing. The purple fingers: everyone’s familiar with this. But what wasn’t really reported was, first of all, the ridiculousness of these elections where instead of individuals running we had political parties because the vast majority of the peoples who were going to represent these political parties ran anonymously because they knew the second they announced their name they would be assassinated. So you have all these anonymous candidates running for political parties but one common theme with most of the platforms—particularly most of those in power today—was that they were going to demand a
timetable for withdrawal of occupation forces. This was the main pledge made to people to acquire their vote, and the first thing that happened when people voted—and it ended up being about 40 percent of voters who participated, and they literally risked their lives to vote because of this—and within two weeks of the election, Don Rumsfeld made a quick trip over to Baghdad. And by the time he left, there was no talk anymore of withdrawal coming out of this new Iraqi government. I interviewed people in many districts of Baghdad who literally had been fed media saying that if you don’t vote, then you’re not going to be able to keep acquiring your monthly food ration. So I met many, many people who voted for food. They were literally afraid that they would not be able to acquire their monthly food ration, which most Iraqis today are still very, very dependent upon. So there were these types of reasons why people did risk their lives to go vote, and yet look at how it was reported by so many of the establishment media back here.

**Question from the Audience:** Thank you very much for inviting the audience to ask questions. It’s very much appreciated. A comment and a question or two. First of all, you mentioned the lack of medical supplies in Iraq. My wife and I are from Kalamazoo, Michigan. We have a group there affiliated with Iraqis who are living in Kalamazoo. We have an organization called Iraqi Health Now, and I know a lot of people are frustrated. How can Americans show Iraqis that we care? Iraqi Health Now, if you enter it into your search engine, will come right up and it will tell you how you can provide help to Iraqis. And it’s because we have Iraqis there who are from Basra, and they have connections with the hospitals. If you don’t do that, medical help and goods can simply disappear when they’re sent.

Second: please confirm that white phosphorus was used in Fallujah based on your experience, and what’s wrong with using white phosphorus?

My second question has to do with the bombing of the Golden Dome Mosque in Samarra. You mentioned Samarra. It is my understanding from my Iraqi friends that a very famous journalist in Iraq drove down from Mosul immediately after the bombing. And this was a professional job; you only have to look at the photos of what happened to that mosque. It was a very professional job. She went down and interviewed people, and within a very short time—just minutes, hours—she was assassinated. Of course, there have been many journalists killed in Iraq—many journalists. You are to be commended for going there. My Iraqi friends tell me there were never any sectarian problems in Iraq while they lived there for decades. Of course, the bombing of that mosque set off all this sectarian killing in Baghdad and other places in Iraq. Would you comment about what you know about the bombing of the mosque in Samarra from what you’ve heard.

**Jamail:** Sure. First, thank you for what you’re doing regarding the health supplies. That’s critical. I’m glad that you’re doing it.

First, white phosphorus. Yes, I can confirm. I was not the first reporter to report that, but I was, as far as I know, the first Western reporter to report the military use of white phosphorus. A couple of other Arab outlets had already reported it. But the military used white phosphorus in Fallujah. It’s not an illegal weapon, but it’s a restricted weapon under the Geneva Conventions. First of all, for those who don’t know, white phosphorus is an incendiary weapon. It has a chemical agent in it where it explodes. The military
uses it for illumination purposes at times. It’s extreme. It burns very, very hot—very, very bright. But if it hits you, it will literally burn all the way down to your bone and you can’t put it out. It was being used enough in Fallujah, and here’s where the restricted part comes in: through the Geneva Conventions, if there might be civilians in an area where you’re going to use it, then that’s when it’s against international law to use it. So, according to the Pentagon, in Fallujah during the November siege, there were between 30,000 and 50,000 people who remained in the city who either couldn’t leave, wouldn’t leave, had disabilities, whatever. So it was used. I reported on it at the time on Democracy Now!, on Inter Press Service. And then it wasn’t until a year later when RAI TV, an Italian television station, aired a documentary about illegal weapons being used in Fallujah. That reopened the debate. An independent newspaper in the UK called me and said, “Hey, you broke this story. We’re running a series of articles. We think we’ve got the Pentagon with their pants down on this one, and we want you to write a piece.” So they had an article come out. The Pentagon, of course, denied: “No, we didn’t use it.” Then they had another article come out: Well, here are these soldiers saying, “Yes, we did use it.” Then the Pentagon said, “Yes, we did use it, but only for illumination.” We produced another story—maybe it was mine at the time—and they said, “OK, well, we did use it, but only against fighters.” And then more information was produced that basically just refuted everything they said, and then they admitted, “Yes, we did use it.” But again, despite that, there were, as far as I know, two editorials written in major papers, but there was not one hard news story written about the U.S. military use of white phosphorus in Fallujah even after the Pentagon admitted it.

Then, regarding the bombing: On February 22, 2006, the Shrine of al-Askari, a very sacred Shia shrine in Samarra, which is a predominately Sunni city, was exploded. A huge bomb went off—actually, reports are that it was two bombs—and essentially annihilated most of the main part of the shrine. And this set in motion a chain of events where it basically made it a killing field for Sunnis, particularly in places like Baghdad and across much of southern Iraq, where particularly the Mahdi Army militia of Muqtada al Sadr was set out to basically annihilate Sunnis. And many Sunnis, particularly in places in Baghdad, were referring to it as genocide. But I, too, have heard stories of it being a sort of inside job. In Samarra, there was one Iraqi man who had an Internet café and slept there so it wouldn’t be looted each night. Samarra was under curfew at the time, and he watched people going into the shrine, which was under guard by Iraqi and American forces … going in and then coming out right before curfew ended, and 45 minutes later the bombs going off. But I haven’t investigated it enough to be able to report for sure that that is or is not what occurred. But the woman you mentioned—I’m trying to remember her name—she’s an Iraqi woman. She’s actually from Samarra, and she went in there right after the bombing, and she was reporting for Al Jazeera, and she was killed. And Al Jazeera Arabic has actually run programs on her and the excellent work she was doing as an Iraqi in a very nationalist way of reporting this, and on that being used as a cause for sectarianism in the country. But one thing about that: I know that story might sound a bit way out to people, but false flag operations and black operations are very, very common. I think one that I will talk about confidently that is very well documented: Down in Basra long before that happened, actually, there were two undercover British SAS officers caught by Iraqi security forces in an unmarked car. They had wigs on, they were dressed locally. These were military men.
caught by Iraqi security forces in a car full of explosives and remote detonating devices. They were held in jail and they were going to be tried for planting bombs to foment sectarian violence, but before that could happen, the Brits razed the jail to the ground and got the two guys out. Then, a few weeks after that happened, there was another incident in Tikrit where Iraqi forces caught two private Western security contractors—basically, a repeat of this story. But the Americans came and collected them before anything could happen. So again, this is not new; it’s well documented in declassified CIA documents that this happens all the time in various military or nonmilitary interventions around the globe. But without a doubt, the sectarianism is an important thing to address. In Baghdad in 2002, 50 percent of all registered marriages were between Sunni and Shia. Some of the largest tribes in the country are Sunni-Shia. This sectarianism that we see in the country today is only a result of the occupation, and I spend a lot of time in my book outlining U.S.-backed death squads while Negroponte was the ambassador and retired General James Steele was counselor for Iraq security affairs. These same two guys worked together in Central America under Reagan, so a re-doing again or recycling of similar types of policy: divide and conquer.

Gonnerman: The gentleman mentioned that a lot of journalists have been killed. And in February 2005, you decided that the margin of safety was becoming too narrow. You have been back and forth to the Middle East, but not to Iraq since that time.

Jamail: I could feel the walls closing by the time I left, and this was about a week after the January elections, where we would be going down a main road of Baghdad and you’d look down the road, and, OK, there are a few tires thrown out in the middle of the road, and there’s a couple or two or four or five guys standing there in civilian clothes with Kalashnikovs, so you do a U-turn. Who are these guys? Who are they with? What do they want? They could be literally anybody. But you could still work around that: U-turn, find a different route. But then it got to where there was more and more of this popping up and it was getting harder and harder to navigate in Baghdad. By then, it was clear that if you as a Western journalist were taken hostage by x group, whatever their affiliation was, that oftentimes, even already then, the first thing that happened to the Iraqi working with you was that they were killed and just left on the side of the road. An example of this would be Jill Carroll with the Christian Science Monitor, who had stayed on in Iraq. Several months after I left, that’s exactly what happened. She and her interpreter were pulled over by a car full of armed men and her interpreter was killed and left on the side of the road and she was kidnapped until a huge ransom was paid. So I could kind of feel the walls closing in and had learned enough to trust my intuition and know that the time to go is now, and I probably wouldn’t be coming back. Plus, after I left, the attrition of what happened to Iraqis and most of the people that I worked with: some had been killed, most of them had fled the country altogether either to Jordan or Syria, and to this day, I literally know just a handful of Iraqis left that have remained at home.

Question from the Audience: I know you’re pretty familiar with the recent death count surveys. There was a recent one that said 1.2 million Iraqis, and an updated Lancet says around a million. I was wondering what your impression is, as an embedded journalist, of the most accurate death count for Iraqis? My second question has to do with the two British special forces, and to what extent you feel that the U.S. government is instigating
the sectarian violence and supporting both sides. My third question is: I know that they’re building permanent military bases. How long do you feel we’ll be in Iraq?

Jamail: I’ll work backwards. The first issue with the bases is that there’s nothing on the ground to indicate, nor in any of the U.S. foreign policy like the National Security Strategy or the Quadrennial Defense Review Report or other key documents driving U.S. foreign policy, not just in Iraq but in the Middle East, to lead me to believe that there’s an end in sight. We have permanent bases on the ground; there’s going to be between six and twelve. We don’t know the exact number yet because the number is being consolidated down. It’s gone from over 100 to less than 50 now, and they’re still consolidating. But you look at these bases being built, and just the infrastructure of these permanent troop compounds, with swimming pools, first-run movie cinemas; basically, sparing you all the details, there’s infrastructure on the level of some of the bases that we have in Japan and Germany and South Korea, and how long have those bases been there? We can get into semantics over the word “permanent,” but if we look at the National Security Strategy of the United States, updated March 2006, or the Quadrennial Defense Review Report, it’s very easy to read these documents and see that when the U.S. classifies other countries’ resources as in the national security interest of the United States, and the shipping lanes of those resources, this is telling us a lot. And then compounded with the bases, the largest embassy anywhere on the globe of anyone, and the permanency of the occupation, I think all things indicate that. Certainly they would like to lower the number of troops on the ground. I think we can look ahead to Afghanistan, the earlier occupation that has about a two-year start on that in Iraq, to get an idea of what they maybe want it to look like. And I think it’s fewer troops, staying more at home in the bases, and just trying to run the occupation that way and being on the sidelines to prop up a puppet government in Kabul/Baghdad. That’s what we’re seeing. Not that it’s succeeding, but I think that’s what the hope is.

The death count: I’m glad that you bring that up because unfortunately, there is controversy about this, and a lot of it is from other groups with extremely questionable and deeply flawed tactics. I can go into that a little bit, too. But first, I think we stick with the proven, scientific methodology. The survey of note is the one that you mentioned, carried out by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Health in conjunction with Iraqi doctors from Mustansiriya University. They used the most up-to-date, scientific methodology in tabulating mortality in Iraq. They did the legwork for this survey around the summer of 2005, and then it was published in the peer-reviewed *Lancet* medical journal in Great Britain, which is akin to the *New England Journal of Medicine* here. That was published on October 29, 2006, and found 655,000 Iraqis, or 2.5 percent of the total population of the country, had died as a direct result of the invasion and occupation. Now, those aren’t just violent deaths. Those are also deaths attributable to infrastructure destruction and other things like that, as well as criminal activity and sectarian militias and death squads, etcetera. But the other main survey that started to raise this whole issue as being controversial is Iraq Body Count. This is basically a group of people based in the UK that started trying to tabulate Iraqi deaths. First of all, they only counted a death that was reported on by three different media sources. How many deaths here, for example, get reported on by three different media sources? Also in Iraq, they didn’t include as a legitimate media source a news
organization that did not have an English Web site. So Al Sharqiya doesn’t count as a media source if they report a death because they don’t have an English Web site, but Fox News does. Even the founders of this Web site admit that it’s definitely not a total count; at a minimum, we’re three times too low, etcetera. They admit this, but they won’t be more forthcoming with the fact that this is a very incomplete survey. While it is valuable for what it is, without a doubt—it’s a useful resource, especially for a journalist—but citing that as the total count or the more recent survey published in the New England Journal of Medicine, that only includes violent deaths, and the horrible misreportage around that, as though it’s a counter to the Lancet survey, which is actually not true at all, has caused this debate around deaths. But the more up-to-date figures: one group called Just Foreign Policy, based in the U.S., based on the Lancet survey and then extrapolating data from that forward from UN figures, Red Crescent figures, media figures, etcetera, estimates that the total is now over 1.1 million. There’s another group—the OMB group in the UK—totally unrelated, that estimates 1.2 million with a similar methodology. But it’s absolutely catastrophic. And that figure, coupled with the Oxfam International Report that was released this last July, found that 4 million Iraqis are in need of emergency aid, meaning if they don’t get access to water and food and medical aid when necessary, then they’re literally at risk for their lives. In addition to 4-1/2 million people displaced from their homes, according to the UNHCR, and taking into account the fact that Iraq’s population (27 million when the invasion was launched) is down now to, at most, 25 million considering that 2 ¼ million have fled the country altogether and another million are dead, we’re talking about upwards of 35-40 percent of the total population of the country that is either displaced from their homes, in need of emergency aid, or dead. This is the catastrophic scope of the real situation.

Then, false flag operations are really the sectarianism. Just briefly, because I touched on it a bit earlier, but it’s my belief that there was a deliberate policy of divide and conquer, divide to rule, from the beginning of the occupation. For example, I had a friend—he’s dead now—I mention him in the book. His name was Sheikh Adnan. He was a Friday speaker at the mosque in Baquba. He told me that three weeks into the occupation, a military commander came to Baquba, which is the capital of Diyala Province (it’s about 65 miles northeast of Baghdad). And he said that this commander showed up and said, “OK, we’re going to have a meeting. We want all the tribal leaders of this area and the religious leaders to come.” A few days later that meeting took place. And he said they were all sitting in this big tent, this man was up at the front, and he literally said, “OK, we want all the Shia on this side and all the Sunni on this side.” And he said, “We all just looked at each other. This is not what we had done. We pray together and we don’t differentiate ourselves that way.” That, coupled with … look at the Iraq Governing Council set up under the CPA—set up strictly along sectarian and ethnic lines. So 60 percent of the country is Shia, so 60 percent of the IGC is Shia. Same with Sunnis, same with Kurds (even though Kurds are Sunni). Throw in a Turkeman and a Christian and a couple of ladies so it looks a little bit respectable for the media and call it good. My point is just immediately getting people thinking along sectarian and ethnic lines, starting power struggles within various groups, etcetera. This is on to its current manifestation where, literally, we have the U.S. backing an 80,000-strong, mostly Sunni militia (that is, militarily), while simultaneously supporting the majority Shia government in Baghdad politically. And as one of the active duty troops I was talking to recently about this who
had just come back said, “It’s classic divide and conquer,” and what better policy to thwart any efforts of reconciliation.

**Question from the Audience (continued):** Do you think we’ll attack Iran?

**Jamail:** Iran. It’s not my area of expertise, but based on what colleagues like Seymour Hersh and others who have their finger on the pulse of people within the administration who say that they believe the decision still is “when” and not “if,” that all things are indicating that despite the lunacy and lack of logic about it, certainly there is a lot to indicate that they still want to do that.

**Question from the Audience:** Tell us about the surge. We’re hearing from John McCain and Mitt Romney and right-wing columnists that the surge has really turned things around.

**Jamail:** You don’t believe them?

**Question from the Audience (continued):** I have my doubts, but maybe you can clear them up.

**Jamail:** I’m glad that you brought that up. I’ll just hold up, aside from a lot of the information I just gave, particularly about the state of the infrastructure, how many people have died, how many are displaced, how many are in need of emergency aid…. There have been several main arguments to back up why this surge is making progress or why there is success. One back this past fall, around November was (most of you can probably remember) there was a concerted amount of energy put into getting stories out, particularly in a lot of the mainstream papers, of “New life is being breathed into Baghdad; Look, people are coming back to their homes.”

Let me deconstruct that just a little bit. It was technically correct to say, yes, some people going back to their homes in Baghdad. But the context of that: even back then, there were over 4.5 million people displaced from their homes. Since the surge started, there’s been a quadrupling of the number of people displaced from their homes. In Baghdad alone—a city of 6 million people—one out of four people is displaced. So these people coming back to their homes: at that time, it was still under 60,000. So, first of all, 60,000 out of 4.5 million people. Then, of those coming home, UNHCR did a spot survey and found that roughly 50 percent of those coming back home were doing so because they literally had been in Syria and Jordan and ran out of money. You can’t work as a refugee. It’s illegal, plus if you were caught you would immediately lose refugee status and be sent back home. For so many of these people that have fled, it’s an automatic death sentence. So that’s 50 percent. Another big chunk of the percentage came from people who literally couldn’t get out of the country; Jordan had long since become quite strict on who they allowed in. And then Syria, up until October 1, was the only country on earth left that, as an Iraqi, you could go and not have to worry about visa restrictions. As of October 1, though, they did impose restrictions where you either had to have a merchant visa or a medical visa to get in. That’s another reason why a lot of people were coming back home. The same survey found that only 18 percent of the people coming back to their homes were doing so because they wanted to. So much for new life being breathed into Baghdad.
Then another big reason is, yes, there are fewer U.S. troops being killed. And that’s unarguable; that’s a fact. Fewer U.S. troops have been killed in the last three to four months in Iraq than in a long time. But, again, let’s look at why. Let’s unpack that a little bit. If you look at when that dramatic decrease started to happen, it started to happen on almost exactly the same date that Muqtada al Sadr put militia on stand-down. He has the largest militia in the country. It had been heavily infiltrated, with people posing as Mahdi Army people doing really horrible acts, as well as parts of his militia had fallen out of his control. There were clashes between his militia men and members of the Bata organization, and some Shia pilgrims had been killed in places like Karbala, for example, so he put his militia on stand-down to reorganize where, in a period of less than two weeks now, he’s going to need to announce: is that six-month period going to end or are we going to continue it? That’s one key reason why fewer troops are dying. Another key reason: there’s been a seven-fold increase in the amount of air power used this year as compared to last year. So it’s basically the Vietnam strategy, which is something that Sey Hersh reported was going to happen well over a year ago in the *New Yorker* that they basically shifted to this rolling thunder type of policy reminiscent of Vietnam in an effort to keep the number of troops dying down. Also, there are fewer patrols being run on the ground. And I think another very key factor is this … I mentioned it earlier … this 80,000-strong Sunni militia. The military calls them “concerned local citizens.” These are the same people that, sometimes even just a few weeks ago, they were calling terrorists and Al Qaeda or anti-occupation militants, etcetera, where now they’re being paid $300 to $350 a month. They’re called “concerned local citizens,” and they’re literally being paid just to stand down and not attack American or occupation forces in Iraq. The tribal leaders under which they follow orders are also being paid millions and millions of dollars of U.S. taxpayer money. This is another key reason why there is a huge dampening of the violence for now in Al Anbar Province and parts of Baghdad. I would argue, and I think confidently, that it’s a ticking time bomb.

**Gonnerman:** You mentioned Al Qaeda. What is it?

**Jamail:** Al Qaeda definitely exists in Iraq today. It definitely did not exist in Iraq prior to the invasion and occupation. We can be critical of the brutal dictator Saddam Hussein for many things, but one thing you do get under dictatorships is you generally have quite good security. People tend to not get out of line. There was not Al Qaeda in Iraq; there were no car bombs, this kind of thing. But, again, when that state was smashed and completely removed, and one could argue either out of negligence or not enough troops, or whatever, but the fact was that the borders remained relatively open and remain relatively porous to this day. So any group that wanted to could come into Iraq, and without a doubt, Al Qaeda elements did come in. Just to frame it, even according to the U.S. military, the maximum percentage of people attacking them that are not Iraqi, i.e., potentially Al Qaeda, is between 4 percent and 6 percent, and that’s according to the U.S. military. So we’re talking about very, very small numbers. But they definitely do exist in Iraq today, and certainly many of the atrocities that have been carried out against Iraqi civilians like market bombings and mosque bombings and things like that, certainly that is a stated agenda of Al Qaeda in Iraq, where basically they have this fundamentalist ideology, and anyone who doesn’t subscribe to that exact ideology needs to be wiped out.
Question from the Audience: Could you tell us a little bit about the sentiments of the Iraqi people toward the government in power nowadays? And there was a claim that the reason we invaded Iraq was for oil, so in light of that, what is happening to the oil revenue, and how is it going to affect the future of Iraq and what do you think about this idea of federalism or Shia, Sunni, and Kurd?

Jamail: Thank you. I’ll start with the second question. For example: the oil, and was the war about oil? I could pull out papers and read many, many quotes from people like Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld and folks like this, and Dick Cheney’s energy task force, etcetera, about oil, and it’s quite an easy argument to back up the thought that this invasion and occupation is about oil and Iraq’s natural resources, which is where Iraq gets over 80 percent of its income as a country. First of all, regarding the oil, up to today in Iraq, for not one day have oil exports either been equal to or over what they were at pre-invasion levels under Saddam Hussein under 12-1/2 years of sanctions. But I think, again, when you look at these policies—these documents that I cited—the National Security Strategy, and things of this nature, and you read the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which has had a huge impact on the national security strategy, and looking at, of course, the base infrastructure being built in Iraq and these documents driving U.S. policy, and why people like John McCain and retired CENTCOM General John Abizaid—you’ve heard of him here, being in a stone’s throw distance from the Hoover Institution—and people like Greenspan now openly talk about being in Iraq indefinitely, whether it’s fifty years or one hundred years, if you’re McCain. They’re so flippant about this because I think that is the plan; it’s essentially a matter of dwindling resources. And the U.S. empire project at this point, as lined out in the PNAC, is dependent on controlling Mideast resources, where two-thirds of the world’s oil is, and getting there and sitting on it, and not necessarily pulling it out and using it right now, but sitting on it so that other potential rival powers like the EU or Russia or China couldn’t get there. And at the end of the day, that’s where the bombing of Iran factors in. If the U.S. controls the oil and natural gas resources of both of those countries, then it has a huge impact on really taking a lot of the power out of OPEC. Then other countries and powers will have to come through us. We’ll determine the price, to a much larger extent, to get those resources. And the U.S. empire project depends on that. Will it succeed? I absolutely do not think it has any chance of succeeding whatsoever. I think it’s total lunacy. But I think that’s what these people are going for.

And in regards to the federalism or the “soft partition” of Iraq, if you’re Joe Biden, I think it’s doomed to fail, and I think we’re already seeing it fail. For example, as even the Kurds, who I think are the closest example we have of federalist Iraq, where as they continue to try to move toward independence in northern Iraq and kind of cut away from the government of Baghdad, we see Turkey’s response to that. I think that’s this militarism, where even yesterday we have huge bombing runs being made into northern Iraq and artillery shellings and 100,000 Turkish troops on the border. So what happens as Kirkuk, the oil center of northern Iraq, where the second largest oil field in the country is Baiji just outside of Kirkuk … what happens as they continue to try to move towards independence? Turkey is not going to stand for that. Whether you agree with that or not is subject to opinion, but without a doubt, Turkey is just not standing for it, and we’re seeing that happening now. Then, for the rest of Iraq, I think there’s still—at least for
right now, and who’s to say in six months or a year from now—but at least for right now, from what I’m hearing, there’s enough nationalism left between people in central and southern Iraq that I don’t really see any kind of effective partitioning that’s going to be successful there.

Did I answer all your questions?

**Question from the Audience (continued):** The first one about the sentiment of people about the Iraqi government.

**Jamail:** Ah, yes. The most recent polls I’ve seen show that 85 percent of Iraqis favor immediate and unconditional withdrawal. They’re willing to take their risks of what would happen. That same poll asked people what they felt about the government in Baghdad, and less than 1 percent of the people polled supported the government. And the joke, my friends in Baghdad today tell me, is that that less than 1 percent is the government themselves. [Laughter]

**Question from the Audience:** Perhaps I missed it in our presentation, but why did you choose Iraq as opposed to going to the West Bank or somewhere else where there are longer running conflicts?

**Jamail:** That’s a good question. I was going to go to the West Bank first. That was what I initially felt drawn to. Frankly, to be a bit personal, I literally had these feelings of doom and felt I had this kind of dark cloud of foreboding every time I started to continue making my plans to go to report on that occupation. I literally had a very, very bad dream one night and woke up and decided, You know, actually, I feel I should to Iraq. My country is more directly involved (not by much, necessarily), but more directly involved in that situation, and right now that’s what I feel more passionate about. And once I made that decision, that sense of foreboding and dark gloom went away. And frankly it’s as simple as that. That’s why I decided to go to Iraq instead.

**Gonnerman:** In the interest of time, let’s take the last several questions as a group.

**Question from the Audience:** Could you speak about the Israeli military being over in Iraq and advising United States troops?

**Question from the Audience:** Can democracy work in Iraq?

**Question from the Audience:** Coming out of 1991, the media was critical of itself that they had gotten it wrong by the whole embedding of the media that they weren’t being critical enough of government—that there wasn’t enough objectivity and true reporting of what was going on. Fast forward ahead: how did we get into this situation again where they fell into the same pattern and have been largely obscuring again and telling us the story that the Pentagon wants us to hear?

**Jamail:** I’ll start with the direct Israeli military involvement in training U.S. military forces. I do mention this in the book because the example I discussed earlier about Samarra, of literally seeing this blatant collective punishment: OK, a roadside bomb goes off, so the military comes back with bulldozers and just plows down the house and then cuts water and electricity to the entire city for several days. That was December 2003. I did some research and actually found that it was not too long before that time that the
U.S. military was flying over Israeli military advisers to Fort Bragg to learn counter-insurgency measures. So this had actually already been reported on by other sources. That, coupled with now, even today, we had the BBC actually show footage not that long ago of the Massad being in the Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq advising Peshmerga and this sort of thing. And then, of course, we don’t know of Massad presence, but it’s assumed by people like retired General Janis Karpinski, who was in charge of Abu Ghraib, stating very openly that, Yes, we just assumed that there were Israeli Massad in the prisons, and the interrogators—nobody really knew who they were or who they were working with. But without a doubt, if we just simply look at strategy used in the occupied territories, for example, in Gaza and the West Bank, etcetera, and then that used in Iraq, it’s mirror images, from how the check points are run to biometrics to the style of collective punishments, and these types of things. But without a doubt, there has been very direct Israeli involvement.

Democracy: Can it work? It’s similar to the example in Palestine, where there’s a legitimate election, it’s overseen by international observers, but, oops, the people chose the wrong party, Hamas. So it’s not allowed to work and now they’re deposed, and Fatah is in and we’re going to support Mahmoud Abbas. Well, similar to Iraq, for example, again, let’s just stick with the January 30, 2005, elections. The government is elected, it comes into power. The way that government system works is that one of their first responsibilities then as a government is to, within that government, choose a prime minister. And they did that; they chose a man named Ibrahim al Jafari. And he stayed in power for a little bit but wasn’t exactly toeing the U.S.-U.K. line and was a little too friendly with the Sadr movement, which is where he got a lot of his support. So Condoleezza Rice and her U.K. counterpart at the time, Jack Straw, flew over to Baghdad, and the last day that they were there, Jafari was out and Nouri al Maliki is now prime minister, so where’s the democracy in that? I think that Iraq is a situation where this is the cradle of civilization. If anyone understands law and democracy, it’s the Iraqi people. And I think given an opportunity of having a real sovereign government with at least some popular support and not under occupation where literally every country in the region and countries from halfway around the globe like the United States are meddling in their affairs, I think absolutely Iraqis are more than capable of governing themselves in whatever chosen system of government they want to apply.

Gonnerman:

Are you optimistic about the effects of new media in public education?

Jamail: You know, it’s funny. Sometimes I feel like a voice in the wilderness about Iraq, but I’ve been going around the country on a book tour. My book came out in October and I’ve been talking to a lot of different people in a lot of different states, and one thing I do see consistently is that despite most of the establishment media still basically being about three years behind in reporting what’s actually happening on the ground in Iraq, and the level of reportage still being so low overall, with few exceptions, most people do have a pretty good understanding of what’s going on there. And I think if we look at the overall polling right now, where of course the people running for president in this country, or at least most of them, and certainly the overall media, want people to think that domestic issues and the economy are the most important thing for the elections,
and not Iraq, recent polls actually show the opposite. Most people in this country still think that Iraq is the most important issue, and they understand that the economic situation is probably symptomatic of the fact that we’re spending over $2 billion a week just to be in Iraq and that they are a bit tied together and you can’t take one without the other. Most people in the United States get this and understand what the occupation costs in financial terms and otherwise. I think that that’s happening despite the level of propaganda and despite the efforts of the administration and the power structure. And I think that’s a result of people going out and seeking other information, whether it’s using the Internet and reading it abroad or tuning in alternative media here. And I think that’s really helpful because I think that the mainstream news media here is in a state of crisis. I think that that’s a good thing. I think they deserve that; they’ve brought it upon themselves. And I think it’s up to us to keep holding their feet to the fire so that we have a media where journalists actually do their job. [Applause]

Gonnerman: Well, Dahr Jamail, you’re a truly courageous example to all of us for what it means to have a commitment to the truth. And here at the university, I think we often forget that having a commitment to the truth as you do is what enables us to grow and enables us to create the kind of world we all want to live in, so thank you very much. [Applause]

Jamail: Thank you. [Applause]

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Dahr Jamail went to Iraq as a civilian in 2003 to deliver the inside story as an independent journalist. He writes for media outlets including Inter Press Service and The Asia Times, and reports for radio broadcasts including Democracy Now! and the BBC. His reports have been published by The Nation, The Sunday Herald, Islam Online, The Guardian, and The Independent. His writings have been collected in Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches from an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq.

Mark Gonnerman (moderator) earned his Ph.D. in religious studies at Stanford and is founding director of the Aurora Forum.

Comments?
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