

# IRAQ: 3 YEARS IN



TONY AUTH

## AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE LOPEZ BY JIM WILKINS

*"The war against Iraq is as disastrous as it is unnecessary; perhaps in terms of its wisdom, purpose and motives, the worst war in American history. Our military men and women were not called to defend America, but rather to attack Iraq. They were not called to die for America, but rather to kill for their country. What more unpatriotic thing could we have asked of our sons and daughters."*

—REV. WILLIAM SLOAN COFFIN (d. 2006)

It's probably no secret that we're in a bad place in Iraq. And we're certainly in a place that President Bush and his advisors didn't perceive us to be. Some of us believe that it is because they were not willing to conceive of some of the complexities in Iraq before they chose that option, and others of us believe that he didn't heed the advice of some of his own military authorities about what there was to do to bring a country into order after the disarray of a war toppling a dictator.

Where are we? We're in a couple of places. The first is, as deeply as the Bush administration and our ally Great Britain try to put pressure on Iraqis to construct a government, I think we see now, even with the visits of the British foreign minister and our own Secretary of State, that Iraqis are divided politically and that division is being reinforced by some of the violence going on, that they're pretty far away from forming a government, and they can't form a government because they don't accept the rule the United States has set. In some respects you have to have a little sympathy, more sympathy for the Iraqis than is commonly portrayed in the American press. We're asking the party that won the election to be incredibly generous in forming a coalition government, which might be akin to suggesting to George Bush after his reelection, "The Democrats would feel better and be higher participants on your agenda if you only made Ted Kennedy Secretary of State and include Senator Biden as well as maybe Associate Secretary of Defense." Those kinds of things are not done by our democracy and we may be a little shortsighted in asking the Iraqis to do politically what the Bush administration is unwilling to do strategically — and that is to sort through the Baath party membership very quickly, in the short run retain those people who were Baath party members because that was the only way they could have a real job in Iraq under a dictator and find a way to help reconstruct the country on the backs of the people with the expertise and worry a little less about party allegiance.

So that's one problem; the problem of political consensus that we somehow think we can help forge but is not going to emerge. That's a problem in its own right, but it's not

nearly as much a problem as the White House and people out of Washington are talking about. Our fundamental problem in Iraq right now is to prevent civil war. This isn't civil war, this is worse than that. This is anarchy. And under conditions of this anarchy, the harshest violence, as in the terrible bombing which killed 74 and wounded 130 at a mosque in the Shia area. This violence isn't just factional violence. There are 37 kidnappings in Baghdad a day, most of them for reasons of economic gain of people who are underemployed or know how to exploit a system that has no law and order. There is still revenge killing. There are still elements of al-Qaeda and other jihadists who are attacking the U.S. What we have in Iraq is something like full societal breakdown, the inability of the U.S. to not only keep order, but in the fact that the violence is more and more unfolding around us as if we were not even there. This is Lebanon at its worst. Liberia at its worst. This is the failure of a state and the more the United States keeps talking that our job is to get a government going and avert civil war, the more out of touch we are with the character of the violence, which means we are going to be less and less helpful trying to end that violence. It may now have grown bigger than we are.

Somewhere in the last 18 months we lost the ability of the United States' fighting forces on the ground to determine what was going to happen internally in Iraq. And President Bush and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld have been unwilling or unable to admit that. We are in a position where we're essentially doing search and destroy missions on pockets of terrorists here and there but the pockets are relatively insignificant to the militia-based violence that's going on. Also we have no ability whatsoever to end kidnapping, extortion and revenge killing. Army units aren't meant to do those things. Army units aren't meant to put into place democracy. And whatever virtues can flow from the quick and rapid toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime three years ago, the utility of U.S. armed forces there in the minds of many of us has decreased over time. We are not only going to be victims of this anarchy, but worse yet, Iraqis who were willing to give us the benefit of the doubt now hate our presence because we've unleashed forces out of the genie bottle that they always feared we were unwilling to recognize were there, and we don't have the capacity to prevent.

If our purpose was to send a sufficient number of troops that would do some good, you're talking 400,000 to 450,000. We do not, in fact, have the capacity to put those troops in the field given the current state of the U.S. Army. What we do have is a crisis point that demands leadership, and the leadership demand of President Bush is that it's time to go to the United Nations Security Council and the international community and admit that we're in a situation where we need to create an international protectorate in Iraq. We need to put together a coalition of states including Pakistan, India, Canada, and others, who in the best

tradition of UN peacekeeping can provide stabilization before this gets too late. If this isn't done within the next three months, not only will the U.S. be in Iraq for more than a decade, but the hostility to what we have unleashed in the neighboring states will only increase.

The only thing that I think is left to us is the virtue that democracy gives us, and for the American public to reject the notion that this government is moving along in Iraq and we just have to be patient — and to reject the notion that what really is at issue here is civil war. We must put pressure on local elected representatives to say, "We need to do something that is very difficult to do but only a great state like us can do: Go to the United Nations and say we may have underestimated what it may take to do this. Now we ask and call upon you to assist us for the good of the Iraqi people." Some of those people at the UN may let us boil in our own soup; that's terribly unfortunate. But you have a very nervous neighborhood over there. The Pakistanis expressed privately to President Bush during his visit their concern with the mounting violence in Afghanistan and the inability to have stability in Iraq. The Iraqis have taken the unprecedented step of asking for direct dialogue with the United States about Iraq but unfortunately we are holding them at arm's length. The Egyptians have expressed to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice their concern and the possibility of mobilizing a different way of doing what we're doing in Iraq. And the United States has got its head in the sand if we think that somehow this is going to work without engagement of neighbors in the wider community.

I think we're going to see multiple years of more of the same given the hubris of the Bush administration. The history of failed state anarchy is that it takes on its own momentum and folks continue to kill each other and develop a kind of equilibrium of violence that generates lots of refugees which is part of the new trend of the last three months in Iraq — internally displaced people as well as people fleeing into Jordan and elsewhere. And this will go on until at some point the forces are tired of killing one another, and then they will seek international assistance and try to create something out of the rubble. The question is, are we going to essentially bunker in at the bases we built there or will we be forced by events to take sides which would be the worst thing to do, or still be targets of various factions because everybody hates us because we've unleashed this and don't have the capacity to stop it.

I think there is no question that Iraq has become an excellent training ground for future jihadists bent on this kind of violent terror. For all the effort we have expended to close down the terrorist training bases in Afghanistan and having had the moment in time where there was no place that looked safe for al-Qaeda and other related groups to train, we wound up creating one. We created one even better than Afghanistan because you can learn by doing in Iraq, and we all know there's a difference between *theory* versus *action* of and we provided that. At the same time let's remember no matter how bad this has gone in terms of bombings and attacks on the U.S. and our Iraqi allies, either in identifying the dead or in the number of people who are captured, U.S. commanders have been pretty consistent in saying that about only one in ten insurgents they find looks like a foreign fighter. And so even with the increased escalation of violence, it's not been an increase in infiltration of folks from the outside. There's a lot of this that is homegrown. There's a lot of this that's about liberation or power in Iraq. It's doubtful that the average Iraqi will become so angry at the U.S. that they are interested in blowing up something in Chicago, or given our own security net now after 9/11, will be able to find a way to do that. It makes things a little more cumbersome, though, when there are some people in Iraq who come and go to Western Europe and seek European support. I think you can talk about the March 2004 bombings in Spain as being related to the Spanish role in supporting the U.S. You can talk about the summer bombings in London as being related to jihadists' disdain for Britain's role in Iraq. I think we'll see peripheral violence of this type for a while with people who may or may not have had their training in Iraq. But I do think that more than 90% of what is going on here is local. It's the same thing that I think we see with Palestinian violence, or Basque violence before it shut down a couple of months ago. In these cases, terrorism is the method for liberation; it is not terrorism as ideology as is the case with al-Qaeda.

In Iraq's cities, particularly in Basra, Mosul and Baghdad, life is nearly unbearable because there have no predictability. You have four to six hours every day of electricity. If you have a car and have a job, you have to get used to long gas lines. Even for those who held Saddam in incredible disdain, there is the terrible irony of recognizing that larger material conditions, like your paycheck, gasoline, water purification and electricity were better three years ago than they are now. And that's before we get to the notion that if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time, you're dead, victim of a suicide bomber. There are a couple of ways of looking at this. I was on a panel a couple of weeks ago with a congressperson who will remain nameless. He had just come back from a visit to Iraq. His party line was that while the media reports deaths in Baghdad, 16 Iraqi provinces are essentially peaceful. That's like saying about the United States in 1967, "We here in Wyoming aren't experiencing racial violence, it doesn't matter that Detroit, Newark and Los Angeles are burning. That's not a big problem. We're okay."

The average Iraqis, 70% of whom live in cities, have virtually no economic future and no personal security whatsoever. The major urban centers are free-fire zones. The more educated you are the more likely you are now to pick up your family and find a way to either go to one of those obscure



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