

Charles Goyette Interview of Les Roberts
on the Charles Goyette Show
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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNDs3ojeCbY>

CG: Well, Les Roberts is on the line with us this morning on the show. He's an Associate Clinical Professor of Population and Family Health he's been a guest on the Charles Goyette Show in the past. He's worked as an epidemiologist for the World Health Organization, he did that during Rwanda - the civil war in Rwanda. He also wrote that medical journal article in The Lancet about the excess deaths following the invasion of Iraq - put the number at something like 655,000. So we got to him for some direction and some guidance. Dr. Roberts, good morning sir.

LR: Charles, it's great to be back with you again.

CG: It's such a pleasure to have somebody knowledgeable available to us on the show. What did you - how - what was your reaction to the World Health Organization estimation?

LR: It's(?) now(?) the Iraqi government themselves. The World Health Organization didn't do this they just helped analyze it and write it up. It was done by the Ministry of Health and the Statistical Bureau of Iraq. It was done by government workers, and now they're saying the death toll from violence in that exact same window we looked at was 151,000 as you said, but they also said there was maybe 300,000 excess deaths from non-violent cause. So, first of all, the two studies are not different very much about how many people died. One is saying 400 and something thousand, we said 650,000. The thing they differ about is whether most of that increase was from violence, and that's what our study concluded, or only one third of the increase was from violence, and that's what this new study put out in the New England Journal of Medicine last week is saying.

CG: Alright, so if they exclude a big portion of the post-invasion deaths from their estimation, they're saying they died of - of what? Malnutrition, lack of access to hygiene, clean water, hospitals, and so on so they weren't violent deaths and they don't count?

LR: That's exactly what they're saying, and on one hand I suppose in a very very narrow strict sense one can say well, those - those things aren't any one person's fault. No one intentionally caused the health system to break down, caused the water supplies to stop working, and so on. But on the other hand, if we think about the 9-11 attacks, someday, I sure hope Osama Bin Laden is on trial for it, he's going to say, "You know those fireman that ran into the building, those hundreds of firemen? They weren't our targets. We didn't kill them. That was an indirect consequence." And I - I think that there's a slight danger of us seeming a little callous to narrow- to focus in a narrow way on just those deaths caused by bullets and bombs. This - this venture had a human cost, and it's only in our interest as society to figure out what those total costs were. And now an interesting aside is there are these two scientific studies coming to different conclusions about how much of it was violence, and over the course of time scientists will poke holes in both studies and probe and probe and probe and we'll learn form this discrepancy. But this discrepancy is quite minor in terms of, as you said in your intro, how society should view the venture and how we should move from here on.

3:16

CG: But it sounds as though the - the puppet government is responsive to pressure to keep the - sort of the shock and awe, the direct war death tolls down - for some reason.

LR: *laughter* No, you know there are two possibilities for how this discrepancy in how many violent deaths occurred in that first three years of occupation. One is we're overestimating, another is they're underestimating. If we did a little survey there in Phoenix and wanted to know how much extra unclaimed income were people getting, you know the University of Arizona could do it and they might come to one conclusion and the IRS might send people out and knock on doors and come to a different conclusion. And my strong suspicion is that people were reluctant to tell these government workers with their government ID badge that my son was - was killed in a violent clash. So I - I just think that official government folks doing this survey they might have - have done it well, they might have recorded what was said to them honestly, I'm not saying there's anything falsified, I'm just saying there would be a logical, natural tendency for people to under-report violent deaths to the government and by chance they didn't ask for death certificates to confirm the cause of deaths in this study and we did. So I'm - I'm - I think history will bear out that our results are more in keeping with evidence from other sources.

CG: Well, I note as well, a little out of my area of any expertise, but that they employed apparently in their analysis a steady rate of violence during the years 2003 and - to 2006 and you note that that wouldn't have been perhaps the best methodology because there was dramatic increase.

LR: Actually, they didn't - they didn't like, apply; that's actually what they found.

GG: Oh, they -

LR: In the - in the reports of violent deaths to them, they found no difference in 2006 from late 2003 and 2004, and that's just not in keeping with data from the Baghdad morgue, data of burials in the city of Najaf where the Shia traditionally try to take bodies for burial, and our data. In the data the Pentagon keeps, not on deaths, but on attacks per day there was a dramatic increase right through 2006, and that is another reason why I strongly suspect that there was gross under-reporting of violent deaths to these government interviewers.

5:52

CG: Alright. The other issue has to do again with the term of - about violent deaths. The Geneva Convention prohibits the targeting of civilian water treatment facilities for example.

LR: That's right.

CG: And so to the extent that those are contributory factors in the deaths of a large number of people, then that seems very thoroughly to be war deaths.

LR: That's absolutely correct. In fact, there's a - there's a general agreement that we attribute the number of deaths to a natural disaster or to a war by comparing the death rate after with the death rate before. And when a couple years ago we had a really bad heat wave that hit Chicago and maybe a couple years before that in Philadelphia, and we attributed a certain number of deaths, that wasn't all people who died of heart attacks or strokes - that was the number of dead above the normal rate of death that we see. And so that's a pretty standard approach, and it is suggesting again that this study looking just at violent deaths was perhaps underplaying the magnitude of the problem.

CG: The other thing, and I don't know if you've had an opportunity to look at it, but you can't have 4 or 5 million refugees in - internal and external refugees without the death toll

from that going up.

LR: That - that's right, or you can't have, whatever we're up to now, 700,000 orphans in a country and think that only 100,000 people have died - that's right.

7:20

CG: Oh, my God.

LR: Yeah, and as - as he(?) said in the beginning, at this point it does not matter. Let's take what I think the Pentagon's folks' people would - would now consider the most favorable number they could point out. Let's just accept this new Iraqi Government estimate that in that first three years of occupation only 151,000 had died. If the American people knew on the eve of the war that that many people would have died I think there would have been near universal opposition to this venture, and it is, I just think, bad for our souls and bad for our collective wisdom as a - as a democracy that's constantly learning from our mistakes to in any way diminish this - this horrific statement just because it happens to be somewhat lower than a statement someone made earlier on.

CG: Yeah, and in fact if you - if you apply that percentage of deaths across a population base of the - of the United States, I mean of the scope of the horror and the carnage is just - it's frightening.

LR: Yeah, that would be right(?) about 50 million - closer to 20 million deaths, that's right.

CG: That's a lot of 9-11 events all rolled up.

LR: Absolutely, absolutely, and a really lovely thing happened after 9-11 if you recall. That when you walked into a store and you bought something everyone would say "Are you OK?", and they looked you in the eye and really meant it. Just for a few days it was like that, and it was because there was a sense that we collectively has been assaulted, and we felt a sense of community as a result. And to even take these new lower numbers and accept that there was a 9-11 attack per week over years in Iraq should give us some sense of just what happened to the fabric of that society.

9:17

From 9:17 onwards are listener questions