

Democracy Now
Les Roberts Interview
October 12, 2006

Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ju4jQ6wcBII>

Part 2: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dL6R_rIKXM

0:00 for first video - PART 1

Interviewer 2: Les Roberts joins us now from Syracuse, New York. He's one of the main researchers in the study. He was with Johns Hopkins when he co-authored the study, but has just taken a post at Columbia University. Les Roberts, welcome to Democracy Now.

LR: Hi Amy, it's nice to be with you again.

Interviewer 1: It's good to have you with us. Why don't you lay out exactly what you found?

LR: Sure, we, as you said, went to about 50 neighborhoods spread around Iraq that were picked at random, and each time we went we knocked on 40 doors and asked people who lived here on the 1st of January, 2002 and who lived here today and has anyone been born or died in between. And on those occasions when people said someone died, we said well how did they die, and we sort wrote down the details: when, how old they were, what was the cause of death. And when it was violence we asked, "Well who did the killing, how exactly did it happen, what kind of weapon was used?" And at the end of the interview, when no one knew this was coming, we asked most of the time for a death certificate, and 92% of the time people walked into their houses and could produce a death certificate. So we're quite sure our people didn't make this up, and our conclusion was, comparing the death rate for that 14 months before the invasion with the 40 months after, that the death rate is now about four times higher. And in fact is about twice as high as when we last spoke and we did our first study. So things have gotten bad. As you stated, we think about 650,000 extra people have died because of this invasion, and about 600,000, so 90%, are from violence.

Interviewer 2: Well I'm sure you've heard by now the - the responses of President Bush and - and military leaders about this. What is your response to their saying that this is not credible?

LR: I don't want to - I don't want to stoop to that level and start saying general slurs, but I just want to say what we did, the cluster survey approach, is the standard way of measuring mortality in very poor country where the government isn't very functional or in times of war. And when UNICEF goes out and measures mortality in any developing country this is what they do. When the US government went into the end of the War in Kosovo and went into - went into the end of the War in Afghanistan, and the US government measured the death rate this is how they did it. And most ironically, the US government has been spending millions of dollars per year through something called the SMART Initiative to train NGOs and UN workers to do cluster surveys to measure mortality in times of wars and disasters. So I think we used a very standard method. I think that our results are - are couched appropriately in the relative imprecision of this thing(?). It could conceivably have been as few as 400,000 deaths. So we're - so we're upfront about that. We don't know the exact number; we just know the range, and we're very very confident about both the method and the results.

3:22

Interviewer 1: Les Roberts, this was President Bush when he was asked about the study Tuesday during his morning news conference, he dismissed the study, as you know, and said, "Iraqis are willing to tolerate the level of violence in Iraq." The question came from CNN's Susan Malvo:

Susan Malvo: "A group of American and Iraqi health officials today released a report saying 655,000 Iraqis have died since the Iraq War. That figure is 20 times the figure that you cited in December at 30,000. Do you care to amend or update your figure, and do you consider this a credible report?"

President Bush: No I don't consider it a credible report. Neither does General Casey and neither do Iraqi officials. I do - I do know that a lot of innocent people have died, and it troubles me, and it grieves me. And I applaud the Iraqis for their courage in the face of violence. I - I'm, you know, amazed that this is a society which so wants to be free that they're willing to, you know, let this level of violence that they - that they tolerate, and it's now time for the Iraqi government to work hard and bring security to neighborhoods so that people can feel - can feel, you know, at peace. No question it's violent, but this report is one, they put it out before was pretty well - the methodology was pretty much discredited. But I - I you know, I talk to people like General Casey, and of course the Iraqi government put out a statement talking about the report.

Susan Malvo: 30,000 Mr. President? Do you stand by your figure? 30,000?

President Bush: You know I stand by the figure that a lot of innocent people have lost their life. 600,000 or whatever they guessed at is just - it's not credible. Thank you."

5:09

And again, this was General George Casey, the top US military leader in Iraq, who was also asked about the Lancet study:

General Casey: I - I have not seen the study. That 65 - that 650,000 number seems way, way beyond any number I have seen. I have not seen any number higher than 50,000, and so I - I don't give that much credibility at all.

Interviewer: the 50,000 number - where did you see that from?

General Casey: I - I don't remember, but I've seen it over time.

Interviewer: Is it a US military estimate?

General Casey: I don't remember where I saw that. It's either from the Iraqi government or from us, but I don't remember it precisely

General George Casey and President Bush. Les Roberts, your response and also to President Bush saying that Iraqis tolerate this level of violence.

LR: Well, you know, we didn't do a poll of Iraqis about their tolerance for the level of

violence, but I think that - that Iraqis are pretty unhappy with the level of violence. And I think that there are a couple of - of issues that arise because of this; first of all, you know I'm not so surprised that entities that monitor newspaper reports or groups that are looking at official government statistics think that it's 10 times lower than the real number. We have gone and looked at every recent war we could find, and only in Bosnia, did all governmental statistics add up to 1/5 of the true death toll, and in Bosnia the rate was 30 to 40 percent with huge support for surveillance activities from the UN. So it's normal in times of war that communication systems break down, systems for registering events break down, and in Saddam's last year of his reign only about 1/3 of all deaths were captured at Morgues or hospitals through the official government surveillance network. So when things were good and only a third of deaths were captured - what do you think it's like now? *cough* Pardon me. And another thought is that, quite unrelated, if someone said in the 9-11 attacks, 'I think only two or three hundred people died.', we would be really, really upset. And I think in the long view that danger of discarding this study if it's correct is that at a moment when we as a society should be showing contrition, our leaders have essentially expressed indifference to an extraordinary level of suffering and that's just the wrong message either in terms of our long-term security or peace in the Middle East.

7:59 first video ends - PART 1 ends

0:00 for second video - PART 2

Interviewer 2: Les Roberts, I'd like to ask you something about the methodology of the study. Clearly in Iraq, as in most wars of this type, the - the level of violence is uneven across the country. It might not even necessarily correspond to the population densities of different areas. What was the methodology you used to select particular clusters that you - you chose?

LR: Sure. That's a great question, and you're right - in Iraq there is a huge difference in death rates for example between the Kurdish North, which is relatively safe, and the Sunni Triangle, where the death rates are extremely high. And what we did was we got a population estimate of every governorate from the Iraqi government, and we randomly allocated these 50 clusters that we were to visit proportional to the population in each of those governorates so that if in the Kurdish North there's only 20% of the population living in the couple safest provinces we would naturally end up with a sample that's only 20% or so from that zone. And then once we had picked that we were going to visit 2 or 3 neighborhoods in a certain governorate or province we would then make a list of all the villages and towns and cities and again randomly pick one of those to visit so that big places had a larger chance of being visited than smaller places. And finally, when we got down to the village level or to the section of a city we would pick a house at random, visit it and the other 39 houses closest to it to grab a cluster of 40 houses. And luckily, in the analysis we can look at how much variation there was between clusters and when we reported this we didn't say it was 655,000 deaths we said it was 655,000 deaths and we're 95% sure it's between about 400,000 and 950,000. And that - that range of imprecision, is capturing that variance between neighborhoods that you just described. Some places having a lot of violence and some places not. So there is less than a 2% chance that the number is well below 400,000. So, you know, it's not precise, it's incredibly hard to do this kind of work in times of war, and I think that this is - is awfully good given the conditions.

Interviewer 1: Les Roberts, there are some, like very much quoted analyst Anthony Cordesman who are saying this is just a matter of politics, you released this study right before the election - this isn't science, it's politics.

LR: Well, if I'm not mistaken, Anthony Cordesman was formally a Pentagon official and I

think he probably has political ends in what he says. But this study has been underway for most of a year in terms of organizing and getting everything together, it was done June through July, it took some time to get the data out of Iraq because of the logistical troubles of getting people in and out. We analyzed it carefully, we submitted it to the Lancet quite a while ago, and the Lancet had control for when this came out, and I think this is just a lose-lose situation. You know, if this had come out two weeks ago, people would have had said the same thing. If this had come out in the month after or the two months after the next election people in Iraq would have seen this as very political in timing. So anytime within a several month window here we are going to get this accusation, and I just think it's bunk. And more importantly, is it true? It is easy, it's going to be very easy for a couple of reporters to go out and verify our findings because what we've said is the death rate is 4 times higher. And a reporter will only have to go to 4 or 5 villages and go visit the person who takes care of the graveyard and say, "Back in 2002 before the war, how many bodies came in here per week? And now, how many bodies come in here? And most graveyard attendants keep records, and if the average is 4 times higher you'll know we're right. If the number's the same, you'll know we're wrong. It's going to be very easy for people to verify this and get all of this talk about whether it's political out of the way. Because the fundamental issue is how many Iraqis have died, and if our leaders are saying it's 10 times lower than what it actually is, we're driving a wedge between ourselves and the Middle East.

5:09

Interviewer 1: Finally, Les Roberts, I saw you upstate New York a while ago after your first study came out and you commented on how little it was commented on or picked up here in this country - though cited all over the world. But now you have report out in the Lancet and the President Bush responding to it, even if he's discounting it, you've got General Casey responding to it - what about the US press looking at these figures?

LR: You know, I think, this is my opinion, the US press sort of follows public opinion, it doesn't necessarily lead it; except in a few circumstances like AIDS in Africa. And the public is ready to think, wow, things might be going badly in Iraq, and I don't think the public was ready to say that two years ago. And so when this study came out, Tony Blair was asked three times - I'm sorry the 2004 study came out - Tony Blair was asked three times in the week that followed, "What do you think of this estimate that a 100,000 Iraqis had died in the first 18 months of occupation?" No one asked George Bush about how many civilians had died or about our for 14 months, and then when he was asked, it was just by a member of the public in a forum in Philadelphia. And now, within about 4 hours of the study coming out he was asked directly, he was forced to respond, there is a dialogue going on. So, I - the nation as a whole is more ready to honestly talk about Iraq, and that's led the press to be more able to honestly talk about Iraq.