

CULTURAL & ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

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## News / Reality Check: An Interview with Dahr Jamail

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**Story photos:** **Inside the "bloodiest war on record for journalists" from writer who has been warned not to return**

December 19, 2

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Earlier this month, independent journalist Dahr Jamail visited Oahu and Kauai to speak publicly about his own unembedded reporting about the war in Iraq between 2003 and 2005. Before crowds ranging from 40 to 250, Jamail talked about the Iraq war he experienced, U.S. involvement in the Middle East, the possibility of further pre-emptive war and what he sees as the failings of American mainstream media. Contributing writer Joe Letman talked with Dahr Jamail during his visit to Kauai.

**JL:** Do you have any idea how many unembedded journalists yourself are working in Iraq?

**DJ:** I don't know of any aside from, talking about Western journalists, I don't know of any that are there now. And people that have actually gone over there independently and covered it, from probably winter '04 on, just a handful, just a couple of other people. I ran into a couple of freelance French photographers and or two other American freelancers, but it's pretty rare. But now I don't know anybody over there at all.

**JL:** You said you were in Iraq for a total of eight months?

**DJ:** Yeah, over four trips. The first trip was November '03 and that last time I was there was February 2005.

**JL:** You are critical of American mainstream media's coverage of the Iraq war. What organizations, papers, websites do you think have done a good job of realistically covering the war?

**DJ:** Al Jazeera, Al Arabia, the Independent newspaper in the UK with (Robert) Fisk and (Patrick) Cockburn, the Guardian is pretty fair. I would say even the English website of Haaretz in Israel has done a better job than basically all mainstream.

**JL:** What about non-mainstream media in the U.S.?

**DJ:** Democracy Now! which is TV, radio and internet. Pacifica Radio, to a certain degree. And that's where I think community papers have maybe done a better job certain locations than the mainstream.

**JL:** Have you seen any change in press coverage in the U.S. in the last year or so as seems the tide against the war is turning?

**DJ:** There has been a bit of a change. I still think it's a long ways off from adequately, accurately representing how atrocious the situation really is for both soldiers and Iraqis. But, to me, it makes me angry because they should have been reporting this way as it was happening. And I've seen a pretty consistent trend in the mainstream which is even true today that they seem like they're always about year behind the ball. You know, like the level of carnage that we're seeing now, I mean not the exact level but, there's been heinous carnage for well over a year now there's been civil war for well over a year now. And they've only literally less than two weeks ago started calling it even civil war.

**JL:** How would you rate security for civilians in Iraq and journalists now say, with when you were there a couple of years ago?

**DJ:** It's far, far worse now even than when I was there in February 2005 for journalists and civilians alike. It's really awful. You know the recent Lancet Report came out, and for civilians, and with journalists, just last week the Iraqi government made a statement that they're setting up their own basically watch dog journalists group to make sure journalists are falling in line with what the government wants to say.

Reporters Without Borders just came out with their 2006 World Press Freedom survey and they ranked countries and Iraq in 2002 under Saddam was 130 and this year in 2006, three and a half years into U.S. occupation, they're 154. That's based on asking questions like how many journalists are killed, how many are experiencing direct pressure from the state, how many are jailed by the state, how many have to flee the country, this kind of thing. So that pretty much says it all. Iraq's been the bloodiest war on record for journalists. Over 189, mostly Iraqis, have been killed so it's uh... yeah, since I was last... that's why I can't go back. That's how bad it's gotten.

**JL:** You don't have plans to go back?

**DJ:** No, because all the people I work with there said don't come back, you'll get killed.

**JL:** In a November 2004 on line interview with Newtopia magazine, you said, "the Shia/Sunni rift is largely a CIA generated myth. There are countless tribes and marriages alike that are both Shia/Sunni. There are mosques here where they pray together." Do you feel differently about that statement now considering what's going on?

**DJ:** I don't. I would say there's even more evidence that, the fact of US involvement in the divide and conquer methodology basically. If you look at the death squads, the U.S. was instrumental in forming and supporting these death squads under John Negroponte's watch, big surprise, the retired Colonel James Steele, the same James Steele from Central America who headed the military advisory groups there set these up. And I was in Baghdad when it happened. It was just before January '05 when Newsweek ran an article quoting Rumsfeld talking about using the Salvador option. So there's that, there's very hard evidence of the U.S. and Brits alike planting bombs in mosques. The most well documented one was that one in Basra, when that was that, I think it was roughly a year ago where the two undercover SAS guys were caught by Iraqi security forces with a car full of explosives and detonators and thrown in jail before they were busted out by the Brits. So, that type of situation, I think those death squads now have spiralled out of control to the point where they are the leading cause of death. Whether that was planned or not is arguable. I mean, who's to say? But that's definitely, at this point, we do have civil war, but at this point I would argue confidently that it was fomented by the U.S.

**JL:** Do you see more pre-emptive war in the last two years of the Bush administration?

**DJ:** I do. I think anyone who takes comfort in the political seat change of the Democrats, if you look at the leading Democrat's position regarding Iran and especially regarding doing the bidding of the state of Israel, their policies aren't going to be any different than the Republicans. I'd be really surprised if, I hope that I'm wrong and I may be, but I'd be really surprised if we didn't see an attack on Iran some time in the next two years.

**JL:** And if not, possibly in a future administration?

**DJ:** Yeah, maybe early into the 2008 new president.

**JL:** At this point in the occupation of Iraq, do you think there's a role for anti-war protesting in the street and marching?

**DJ:** I do, I believe that it's an illegal occupation and it's not going to end until people here force the government to end it. If you look at all the policy and all the Middle East policy, the U.S. has to keep bases over there. They're not just going to leave it's just not in their plans and they're only going to leave if and when they are forced to leave and the Iraqi people are forcing them to leave on the ground, and just like Vietnam, the Vietnamese resistance coupled with pressure back home coupled with pressure from within the military itself is what it's going to take. People here can expect to go to one big march and 'oh that didn't stop the war, oh too bad,' so it to be sustained pressure over a period of time.

**JL:** You don't think people should be discouraged by the fact that they just completely disregarded these massive protests.

**DJ:** No, because I think that they do have an effect. You know, we may not see the direct effect for a while, but eventually they do have an effect.

**JL:** What are your thoughts on why there are seemingly so few major protests against the war now, compared with during Vietnam?

**DJ:** Well the most obvious one is the lack of a draft. That's a biggie. And the number of soldiers. We just don't have the number of soldiers over there that we had in Vietnam. We don't have tens of thousands killed like we did in Vietnam so I think a lot of it's just numbers. Just not having the draft and not having the numbers. I think the position the military would be put in if they bomb Iran or if Israel bombs Iran is that they would eventually have to send way more soldiers over to Iraq and think at that point we would start seeing numbers of dead and wounded really get to a point where it might kick people out into the streets.

**JL:** Do you see any possibility of the Iraqi government saying, 'ok, it's time for you (the U.S.) to go'?

**DJ:** Not as long as, I think the onus is on us because it's our government that's made this happen and I think it's a puppet government over there and there will not be a legitimate government until the U.S. leaves. So, it would be having the cart before the horse waiting for the Iraqi government to make the move because they just can't do it.

**JL:** What do you say to people who live in Hawaii and are opposed to the occupation of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, a "War on Terror"? Living in a place like Kauai, what can we do? Stand with a sign? A bumper sticker?

**DJ:** It's a tough question...but I think it's important for people to just do what's right in front of them. That whole think globally, act locally slogan is pretty true. What's going on on Kauai, whether it's development, or things that the military is doing here that you think isn't good for the people of this island or for the island itself, get involved in local issues and just do what's right there that is readily available. There are already several groups, and I've run into them myself here that are active on these issues, and pick one that you care about and start doing what you can to help.

You know, I always, of course, encourage people to try and get involved in local media just like you're doing, I think that's critical.

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Jon Letm

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J.S. Willia

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