

Try that One on for Size: Al-Zaidi Puts Iraq Back on the Map

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I can't lie. I've watched Iraqi journalist Montather Al-Zaidi whip those two shoes past George Bush's head more times than I can count. I loved it; I even got into the corny jokes about the Red Sox drafting Al-Zaidi in the spring (cementing my belief that Iraqis have the second strongest arms in the Middle East—behind Palestinians of course). I also read endless blog coverage and joined the Facebook group, "Release Montather Al-Zaidi and Give Him New Shoes."

Overnight, Al-Zaidi became a hero to many Iraqis, Arabs, Bush haters, and anti-war activists. After the episode, Iraqis rallied in the streets with shoes in hand and demanded that their new hero be released (reports have now surfaced that Al-Zaidi's wrist has been broken and he has been tortured in jail). That's when I realized that Al-Zaidi did something much greater than throw two shoes at a war criminal, he (even if it will only last a week) single-handedly put Iraq back on the map.

After the heartwarming questions concerning Bush's safety (given his popularity, he should have been happy it wasn't a couple of Molotov cocktails) and the curious, almost racist, fascination with the meaning of the throwing of a shoe in Arab culture, a few journalists were bitten by what can best be described as a fleeting bug in their industry: integrity. On air, a number of journalists began to question why Al-Zaidi threw the shoes in the first place. The *New York Times* interviewed his proud family, who spoke of the devastation Bush brought to Iraq over the last half decade. His brother, Maythem Al-Zaidi, said, "[h]e was provoked when Mr. Bush said [during the news conference] this is his farewell gift to the Iraqi people." It doesn't take someone with an IQ higher than the president to deduce why Iraqis are so pissed off: our government is responsible for the death of a million Iraqis, the country lacks proper access to electricity, and nearly five million people have been made refugees. Compound this with Bush cramming US victory chants down the throats of Iraqis, and one can understand the journalist's tame gesture.

Bush, like the fool we love to excuse, nonchalantly brushed off the encounter with substandard jokes and reassured the American public that this incident is evidence that democracy is in full effect. *TIME* Magazine's Mark Halperin responded to the episode on Anderson Cooper 360, "[y]ou know my reaction to it, without taking sides...I think the president should be a little more sensitive to what this man was protesting, which was in effect, the death of innocent civilians in Iraq." MSNBC's Rachel Maddow also ended her segment discussing the deaths of Iraqi civilians over the course of the last two days and inferred that the last minute reframing of the war was itself a tragedy.

In the face of dwindling US coverage of Iraq, two shoes thrown at an outgoing president opened Baghdad's door again. And while Iraqis deal with whatever America throws their way, George Bush dodged what one Iraqi threw back. Yet, one has to wonder what will come after the "shoe protest." Though the media may stop covering the anger and devastation caused by America's war on Iraq, it will not go away, nor will its consequences.

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