

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

Back in the USA ^[1]

Atlanta

Returning to the United States always involves a mixed set of images. Why, I wonder, does the defense of the nation against terrorists require that no one use a mobile phone in Atlanta until they are clear of customs and immigration when travelers arriving at Kennedy airport in New York are perfectly free to let friends and family know they have landed while standing in the 45 minute line at passport control?

Usually the many Arab stamps in my passport prompt a second look. This time I was waved customs. At passport control the officer, on learning I am a journalist and I live in Jordan, asked if I'd ever been in Iraq. I said I had. Instead of the usual quick set of questions about what I was doing there he offered, "they sent round a memo a few weeks ago asking for people in our division to volunteer to go work border patrol over in Iraq. Wanna guess how many takers?"

"Not many?"

"Less than zero." He shook his head and handed back my passport.

And yet, 24 hours later, as I maneuvered my rented car through city traffic I heard a radio ad for an Iraq job fair. It takes place next week at a hotel out in the suburbs, and the company doing the advertising is looking for auto mechanics and people who know how to repair small arms. How ridiculous. Either we are so short-sighted that we instinctively hire Americans to do jobs for which there are many, many qualified Iraqis, thereby missing the chance to dent Iraq's unemployment problem (which feeds the insurgency, which makes Iraq yet more dangerous, which means that Americans brought over to fix cars command ever-higher salaries). Or the employing of Iraqis has become increasingly difficult – either because of the potential security threat they pose to their American colleagues or because of the very real threat the insurgency poses to any Iraqi working for the Americans.

Coming back to the States, however, I find I mostly stare in puzzlement at the media. I know at first hand that American journalism is filled with intelligent people. Why, then, does the actual product often seem so inane?

Driving in from the Atlanta airport I listened to the city's main news-talk station report that President Bush had paid a brief inauguration-eve visit to the National Archives to look over the texts of previous inaugurations addresses there, and to "seek inspiration" for his own speech the following day. I'm not sure which irks me more: the idea that the White House believes the public dumb enough to swallow such a patent absurdity, or the media's crass repetition of it in the first place. Do they seriously think we'll buy the idea that a modern president writes his own speeches the night before the event?

Why does the media insist on wasting precious airtime on non-stories like this? It's actually embarrassing. This time last year I was in Baghdad training Iraqi journalists. If someone had brought me an Iraqi version of that inaugural address story I'd have sent it back. Silly photo-ops are not news. At least they are not supposed to be. And we are supposed to be better than this. That's why we send people out to train journalists at developing media institutions in places like Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

What, I wonder, would my Iraqi colleagues make of the lazy reporting, the jingoistic inaugural coverage and the smug defensiveness of talk radio? One shudders to think.

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