

Bush Shoe Thrower Unrepentant

The Iraqi journalist who threw his shoes at former President George W. Bush failed to apologize – I wanted to restore Iraqi pride” he said.

The trial of Muntadhar al-Zeidi began today, and the journalist appealed defiantly to the pride of his war-ravaged country. In his first public appearance since he was taken into custody on Dec. 14, he said he did not intend to harm Bush or to embarrass Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. "What made me do it was the humiliation Iraq has been subjected to due to the U.S. occupation and the murder of innocent people," al-Zeidi said. "I wanted to restore the pride of the Iraqis in any way possible, apart from using weapons." The 30-year-old journalist also alleged during his testimony to the three-judge panel that he was tortured while in jail — something the Iraqi government has denied. Al-Zeidi, who's become a folk hero in Iraq and the rest of Middle East, was greeted by applause and cheers from supporters as he entered the courtroom in western Baghdad. His aunt handed him a scarf imprinted with a red, black and green Iraqi flag, which he kissed and draped around his neck. The chief judge then threatened to order everybody out of the room if they didn't calm down. The trial was later adjourned until March 12. Al-Zeidi has been in Iraqi custody since he was wrestled to the ground by guards and dragged away after the Dec. 14 outburst at Bush's joint news conference with al-Maliki in Baghdad. When he threw the shoes, he shouted at Bush in Arabic: "This is your farewell kiss, you dog! This is from the widows, the orphans and those who were killed in Iraq." In his testimony on Thursday, al-Zeidi described his growing frustration as Bush spoke about his victories and achievement at the press conference — held 37 days before Bush handed the war off to his successor, Barack Obama, who has pledged to end it. "I was seeing a whole country in calamity while Bush was giving a cold and spiritless smile," al-Zeidi testified. "He was saying goodbye after causing the death of many Iraqis and economic destruction." The obscure television reporter was transformed into a celebrity across the Muslim world, where thousands hailed him as a hero and demanded his release for what they considered a justified act of patriotism. Al-Zeidi's attorneys say he has been charged with assaulting a foreign leader, which carries a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison. Al-Zeidi was originally scheduled to appear in court Dec. 31, but the trial was postponed as the defense unsuccessfully tried to get the charge reduced, saying the act didn't merit such harsh punishment. The defense argued Thursday that Bush was not on an official visit because he had arrived in Iraq unannounced and without invitation. That would mean the charge of assaulting a foreign leader would not be applicable, according to the defense.

"The visit was not formal because Bush is an occupier and he was received by the commander of the U.S. Army," one of al-Zeidi's lawyers Ghalib al-Rubaie said. "President Jalal Talabani and the prime minister did not receive him when he arrived." Judge Abdul-Amir al-Rubaie adjourned the trial, saying the court needed time to ask the Iraqi Cabinet whether Bush's visit was "formal or informal." Visits by foreign dignitaries are rarely announced beforehand due to security reasons. The defendant, wearing a beige suit and a black shirt, spoke confidently and showed no signs of the injuries he allegedly suffered at the hands of security forces. The case's investigating judge has said the journalist was struck about the face and eyes, apparently by security agents after he hurled one shoe, then another, forcing Bush to duck for cover. Al-Zeidi said Thursday he was tortured, beaten and given electric shocks during his interrogation. Two Cabinet protocol employees who witnessed the show-throwing incident testified at the trial that no bodyguards assaulted al-Zeidi despite confusion at the scene. One of the witnesses, Sameer Mohammed, said he saw some members of the audience start to beat al-Zeidi but then "the prime minister ordered that the press conference should proceed and that no one should hurt him." Another witness said the guards did not assault al-Zeidi but there was a scuffle. "No one from security or the bodyguards assaulted him, but they were trying to push him out and he was pushing them back," witness Abdul Amir said in testimony read by the judge. Al-Maliki was deeply embarrassed by the assault on an American president who had stood by him during the worst of the violence, when some Arab leaders were quietly urging the U.S. to oust him. Al-Zeidi's brother, Odai, dismissed the testimony by the government witnesses. "The trial was a farce and a joke," he said. "Muntadhar said: 'I do not regret throwing the shoes at Bush and if the clock was turned back, I would hit Bush again.'" Dozens of relatives and supporters who rallied in front of the courthouse before the trial began said al-Zeidi should be praised for standing up to Bush, not punished for his actions. "What Muntadhar has done is revenge for Iraqi widows and for the bloodshed caused by the occupation and policy of Bush," said his aunt, Nawal Lazim, who handed him the scarf as he entered the court. In violence reported by police and military officials on Thursday, a series of roadside bombs apparently targeting Iraqi security forces killed nine people, including four Iraqi soldiers patrolling in Balad Ruz, northeast of Baghdad. A bomb also exploded near a policeman's house west of the capital, killing his wife, son and nephew, and an Iraqi soldier and a civilian were killed in a blast near the Iranian border. ___ Associated Press Writers Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Sameer N. Yacoub contributed to this report.