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Presenter: Army Col. H. R. McMaster, commander of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment **September 13, 2005 1:05 PM EDT**

Press Briefing on Overview of Operation Restoring Rights in Tall Afar, Iraq

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(Col. McMaster briefs via video conference from Iraq. Event joined in progress ...)

MR. WHITMAN: -- we know that it's late your time. Actually, I'm sure that the hours you've been working, it's not even very late for you. But we welcome you to the briefing room. This is the first time that you've met with our Pentagon press corps in this format.

For those of you in the briefing room, this is, of course, Colonel H. R. McMaster. He is the commander of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. It is the regiment that's currently assigned to Multinational Forces Northwest in Iraq. But more importantly, he is currently participating in Operation Restore Rights in Tall Afar. And he's today to give us a brief update and overview of what his forces as well as what the Iraqi security forces have been doing during this operation.

He has for the last several days been totally consumed in this particular operation. And so, I would ask that we keep our questions combined to -- confined to the current operation that we're here to talk about today.

With that, I'll turn it over to you, Col. McMaster, and you can give us kind of an overview, and then we'll get into the questions here.

COL. MCMASTER: Great. Okay, I'll begin by talking about the purpose of the operation and then describe the enemy that we're facing here, and then summarize the effects I think we've had on the enemy over the past couple of weeks.

First of all, the purpose of this operation is the secure the population of Tall Afar from the terrorists who have infiltrated this city and set up a safe haven support base here in Tall Afar. The whole purpose of the operation is to secure the population so that we can lift the enemy's campaign of intimidation and population -- intimidation and coercion over the population and allow economic and political development to proceed here and to return, really, to normal life.

The enemy in this area is -- this is the worst of the worst in terms of people in the world. The enemy here was drawn to Tall Afar for a couple of reasons.

First of all, Tall Afar is positioned along routes that lead from Mosul into Syria. So it was important to the enemy to have freedom of action, not only in Tall Afar, but in western Ninevah province, so they could access sources of external support in Syria. Also, this area is important to the enemy because this enemy -- al Qaeda in Iraq -- wants to foment ethnic and sectarian violence and wants a chaotic environment so that they can operate freely in this area, and ultimately what they hope is that Iraq will fail and descend into civil war. And this area is conducive to those sort of efforts because you have an ethnic minority here: the Turkmen. You have - that - ethnic minority is further divided between a majority of Turkmen Sunna and a minority of Turkmen Shi'ia. And this city of Turkmen exists in an area that also includes other ethnic and sectarian groups, including Sunni Arabs and Izedis, and then also Kurds in the region.

So the enemy moved into here to establish this support base and safe haven. They also moved into this area because there's very dense urban terrain in the city of Tall Afar. It's difficult for our forces, organized as we are as a mechanized force, primarily, to access these areas. And so the enemy went into this safe haven and used it not only to access sources of external support, but they also used this area to train, organize, and equip their forces for employment not only locally here in Tall Afar, but without (sic) the region and potentially throughout the country. So it was very important for us to deny the enemy the ability to use this safe haven and to terrorize this population.

To protect themselves here, what the enemy did is they waged the most brutal and murderous campaign against the people of Tall Afar.

I'd like just to briefly characterize the enemy, describe who we're fighting here. This is an enemy, who when they came in, they removed all the imams from the mosques, and they replaced them with Islamic extremist laymen. They removed all the teachers from the schools and replaced them with people who had a fifth-grade education and who preached hatred and intolerance. They murdered people. In each of their cells that they have within the city has a direct action cell of about 100 or so fighters. They have a kidnapping and murder cell; they have a propaganda cell, a mortar cell, a sniper cell -- a very high degree of organization here. And what the enemy did is to keep the population from performing other activities. To keep the population afraid, they kidnapped and murdered large numbers of the people here, and it was across the spectrum. A Sunni Turkmen imam was kidnapped and murdered. A very fine man, a city councilman, Councilman Suliman (sp), was pulled out of his car in front of his children and his wife and gunned down with about 30 gunshot wounds to his head. The enemy conducted indiscriminate mortar attacks against populated areas and wounded scores of children and killed many others. The enemy here did just the most horrible things you can imagine, in one case murdering a child, placing a booby trap within the child's body and waiting for the parent to come recover the body of their child and exploding it to kill the parents. Beheadings and so forth.

So the enemy's grip over this population to maintain the safe haven was based on fear, coercion, and these sort of heinous acts. And not only were they targeting civilians, brutally murdering them, torturing them, but they were also kidnapping the youth of the city and brainwashing them and trying to turn them into hate-filled murderers.

So, really, there could be no better enemy for our soldiers and Iraqi army soldiers to pursue and defeat and deny the enemy the safe haven in this area.

So I just want to quickly summarize what's occurred here, and then talk about some of the reasons for the success we've had thus far. The regiment began operating here on the 1st of May with our lead squadron, 2nd Squadron. They partnered with the unit that was doing a very effective job at disrupting the enemy here and reinforced their efforts. That was the 1st of the 14th Cavalry.

They began to conduct aggressive offensive operations and reconnaissance operations in the city. The enemy noticed that we're challenging this support base, a base that they desperately wanted to hold onto, so they began to attack our forces in large numbers. And we had stand-up conventional fights against the enemy in this dense urban terrain, where up to 200 of the enemy were attacking our troopers as they conducted operations in this urban area.

The result of those operations were that Iraqi security forces and armed forces killed large numbers of the enemy in those engagements, 30 to 40 of the enemy at a time. So the enemy realized this tactic isn't working, so they went back into harassment attacks -- IEDs, roadside bombs, mortar attacks, sniper attacks against our forces, and attempted to do sort of hit-and-run operations against us.

But our troopers were very aggressive in maintaining contact with the enemy. We have an air/ground team here, so our aerial scouts were able to maintain contact with the enemy as they tried to move into the interior of the city. So we pursued them very effectively.

And we were able to gain access to intelligence here by a very good relationship with the people, who recognized this enemy for who they are and were very forthcoming with human intelligence. In one raid in the beginning of June, for example, we were able to capture 26 targeted individuals, some of the worst people here in Tall Afar, within a 30-minute period. And the enemy began to realize this isn't working either, they can't hide in plain sight anymore.

So what the enemy did in response -- and this was part of this continuous interaction we've had with them since our arrival in this area -- is they intensified their campaign of intimidation over the people. They conducted more sniper attacks against innocent civilians, more mortar attacks.

And in response, we targeted their mortar teams. We killed four of their mortar teams and captured two. We killed about 12 of their sniper teams. And we relentlessly pursued the enemy until the enemy realized that a lot of our power was building now toward Tall Afar because we wanted -- as we were figuring this enemy out, we were preparing for operations to destroy their safe haven in a particular neighborhood of the city.

So as the specter of coalition operations became apparent to the enemy, as we isolated the city, as we improved the effectiveness of our traffic control points to limit their movement, as we continued to pursue the enemy, the enemy responded by sending their fighters, many of them, into the outlying communities to hide in the outlying communities until the operation was over.

But what we did is we conducted effective operations in the outlying areas. Simultaneous with our operations in Tall Afar, we were establishing a permanent security capability along the Syrian border in Rabiya, south of Sinjar Mountain and the town of Sinjar. We took over the town of Bosh (phonetic) from the insurgents and established -- reestablished the police force and the Iraqi army there. We went to the town of Afgani (phonetic) about 12 kilometers north of here. We captured, just out of that one town, one small town of Afgani (phonetic), about 116 of the enemy in three separate operations.

One operation -- that was the most effective -- was an Iraqi army exclusive operation, and then that we established two Iraqi companies and recruited police. The police are done training and now there's a permanent security presence there. The enemy is denied that area. We operated in other outlying communities and captured many more of the enemy. So now, the enemy had that option taken away from them, and they resolved then to defend this safe haven in Sarai. I had a chance to walk downtown today and found a lot of their propaganda in their abandoned fighting positions. And this propaganda was: we cannot afford to lose Tall Afar; we're going to defeat, you know, the coalition forces and Iraqi security forces here. It was exhorting their forces to defend Tall Afar at all costs.

So the enemy then -- as we continue to concentrate our efforts on Tall Afar, we've brought in some very

capable Iraqi security forces to help us. The 3rd Iraqi Army Division, which is our partnership unit -- which over the past four months has gained a tremendous amount of capability -- integrated them into our operations completely, and then, we also brought in some additional Iraqi army battalions as well some Iraqi police formations. And the enemy then moved into some of these outlying neighborhoods outside of their support base, and they wanted to take the fight there to divert our attention. They also tried some diplomatic efforts to call off attacks for a couple of weeks and to act as if the problem was solved -- again, a desperate attempt to avoid the removal of this safe haven in Tall Afar.

But we conducted very effective combat operations against the enemy, we being the Iraqi security forces and our forces. These were very complex defenses in neighborhoods outside of the Sarai neighborhood, which was the center of the enemy's safe haven here. They had their command and control in a safe house in the center that was very heavily defended. Outside of that, they had defensive positions with RPG and machine gun positions. Surrounding those positions, they had homes that were rigged to be demolished by munitions as U.S. and Iraqi soldiers entered them, and then, outside of those, they had Improvised Explosive Devices, roadside bombs, implanted, buried into the roads.

But our forces aggressively pursued the enemy in these areas. They were able to defeat these IEDs based on the human intelligence we developed. We exploded many of them with attack helicopter fire or detonated them with our engineers. We penetrated that defense. Our tanks led with our Iraqi infantry in support. We absorbed any energy from their rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns, continued the assault into these safe havens and destroyed their leadership throughout the city. The word then went out that -- to the enemy that put other elements on notice: look, we're being slaughtered here; we need to avoid these very effective combined forces of Iraqi and U.S. forces. But we continued to relentlessly pursue them as we moved to isolate the Sarai district.

And the main engagements in this fight happened really between the 2nd and the 6th of September, a period of time during which we killed 118 terrorists and captured 137 of them. And we think at this point the enemy realized the futility of their defensive efforts.

In Sarai, the most dense urban terrain you can imagine, there was a very complex defense prepared there, with, again, these roadside bombs, buildings rigged for demolition, machine gun positions, sniper positions, and mortars integrated into this. But with our intelligence, our precision fires capability, we were able to severely disrupt that defense and really collapse it all around the enemy.

We had some very heavy fighting on the 5th and 6th of September, during which we killed many of the enemy, who engaged us from their forward defensive positions. And it was at that point that the enemy shifted their approach again to essentially running away from the area. They gave the word to retreat. They did everything they could to blend in with the civilians who were evacuating from this dense urban area to protect them, and we caught them. We were integrated with the population. The people were pointing out who the enemy was. We had Iraqi army who was very good at sensing something isn't quite right when this man is walking down the street with children, and the children look very nervous. This one man in particular was a beheader who had beheaded over 20 people. And we were able to capture him as the children fled, as we came up to talk to this individual, and the children related to us this man said that they had to walk with him or he would kill them.

We captured five of the enemy dressed as women, trying desperately to get out of the area. Just yesterday we captured 104 of the enemy in these outlying areas.

So we relentlessly pursued the enemy as they attempted to break contact with our forces. But we're maintaining contact with them, and we're continuing to hunt them down.

Okay, I want to get to questions. I know you do, too, so I'm just going to quickly summarize why I think

this operation has been extraordinarily effective.

The first reason is the close integration with Iraqi security forces, especially our partnership division, the 3rd Iraqi Army Division. I mean, we are really complementary in our capabilities, and we have achieved a very high degree of synergy in our efforts as a result of that.

These Iraqi soldiers are brave. They're courageous. They're building capabilities every day. And we draw strength from their example. I mean, these are men who, like our soldiers, are committed to this mission. They're doing it at great risk to themselves. And in this case, based on the ruthlessness of this enemy, they're doing it at great risk to their families as well. So we're proud, very proud to serve alongside these brave Iraqi soldiers.

Also, we achieved, I think, an unprecedented level of cooperation between civil officials and our partnership units: the police, the mayor and the people. (Laughs.) I think the people are sick and tired of this violence, of this enemy, and they are very grateful for our efforts, and the Iraqi army's efforts in particular, to rid them of this enemy. The cooperation with the people, again: another important element of our success here, the access to the intelligence that that relationship we've developed with the people has given us.

And then, I'll tell you -- (laughs) -- the American soldier: the American people have got to be so proud of our soldiers. I can't tell you how proud I am of the troopers of this regiment. They have relentlessly pursued this enemy in continuous combat operations for well over 14 days. They are tough, they are disciplined, they are compassionate. And America ought to be proud of the Cavalry troopers of this regiment and the soldiers more broadly in our army and the armed services.

We have been joined by a very effective organization, the 3rd -- the 2nd of the 325, the White Falcons from the 82nd Airborne Division. They've gotten into this fight and have done a tremendous job. We're coordinating our efforts with the 1st of the 72nd Infantry in Mosul, who is pursuing the enemy relentlessly in their area as the enemy attempts to flee. They are hunting them down in that area. But the American soldier is pursuing the enemies of Iraq, they're pursuing the enemies of our nation. We are committed to this mission to bring freedom and security to 26 million people here. And it is very clear to our soldiers as we go into these areas, as we see these caches, as we see the horrible acts that these people have committed, as we see the extremist literature and the intolerance and the hatred that this enemy possesses, it is very clear to us that these are enemies of our nation, and we are proud to be here to pursue them and defeat them in Tall Afar and broadly throughout this region.

So I'd like to just end with that and then see what questions anybody has about the operation, what our troopers are doing, and what the brave Iraqis are doing alongside our soldiers.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, Colonel, and we'll get right into it.

And we'll start with Charlie here.

Q: Colonel, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters. A couple of brief questions. First of all, what does the "H. R." stand for? What name do you go by besides your initials?

COL. MCMASTER: I can't tell you. It's -- I go by H. R., really, but it's Herbert Raymond. So -- and my mom named me H. R., you know? So everybody calls me H. R.

Q: You've painted an extremely rosy picture of your campaign so far. Have you taken and secured Tall Afar, and are you going to be able to hold it and keep it?

COL. MCMASTER: Yeah. Those are great questions. Nothing's rosy in Iraq, okay? So I don't want to

give you an unrealistic perspective here. What I tried to describe with you was a continuous interaction with the enemy that we've had since our arrival, but an interaction that has been in our favor. We've maintained the initiative over this enemy.

So is Tall Afar secure? No, it's not secure. Is the enemy on the run in Tall Afar? Yes, the enemy's on the run. And we're going to conduct some follow-on operations in the next week or so to relentlessly pursue the enemy across the city.

The standard for success for us here is to ensure that the enemy can no longer wage an effective campaign of intimidation over the population of Tall Afar. And to get to your question, in terms of can we permanently secure it, the answer is, yes, and we're taking all measures to do that. In fact, it's the most complicated part of the mission, is how we provide permanent security. We're introducing Iraqi security forces into the center of the city. Iraqi army will have access to the population. They'll be in patrol bases in the interior of the city.

One of the main local grievances here is that the police force is not representative of the population. In fact, although the Sunni-Turkmen population is 75 percent of the city's population, there are virtually no policemen who are Sunni-Turkmen, and the reason is, if they had joined the police force, their families would have been murdered. So now that we've lifted this ball of fear from the people, we're recruiting police right now. They're going to go to school here in the next couple weeks. We're going to introduce them into Tall Afar with Iraqi army and coalition force backup. So building the capability of the security forces, introducing them into the city, controlling the return of civilians, developing sources within the communities to make sure that we have early warning of these terrorists if they come back -- these are all things that are very much on all of our leaders' minds as we continue to set conditions for permanent security for the people of Tall Afar.

So is it done, yet? No. Will it happen? Yes. It's going to happen. And this operation is setting the conditions for establishing that kind of security, so these people -- these good people in Tall Afar no longer have to suffer. I mean, there are the most beautiful children I've ever seen in my life in this city. I mean, there's Turkmen kids in these multicolored dresses. They've suffered for way too long, and all of us, the Iraqi soldiers, the Iraqi police, our forces are committed to make sure they don't have to suffer anymore. And these terrorists will not come back. They won't come back to Tall Afar.

Q: Hey, Colonel. Bret Baier with Fox News Channel. Just to follow on Charlie's question, do you have enough U.S. troops in western Iraq to continue these operations and hold these cities? The criticism, as you know, has been that you have successful operations and then have to go back and do them again because the insurgents and terrorists come back and infiltrate these cities and towns.

COL. MCMASTER: Well, Bret, what gives us the ability to sort of clear-and-hold as a counterinsurgency strategy is the capability of Iraqi security forces. And I think we have to remember, you know, that the enemy attacked the Iraqi security forces in a very focused manner over the last couple years. Why was that? Because that's their greatest danger to them. So I think we tend to give the enemy, you know, too much credit, not ourselves credit sometimes. You know, we've got the right strategy here, which is to build Iraqi security forces, which can secure the population from these terrorists and these murderers. And the key thing is for us to be able to reconstitute in this area, and that's what we're really doing, is rebuilding, reconstituting police forces, which suffered from a focused attack by the enemy last fall, so that the police can be the primary level of security. And now what has fundamentally changed from operations conducted previously is that we have a capable Iraqi army formation to provide them with backup.

Now is the Iraqi army ready to do that on their own yet? No. I mean, they're not. They have some additional capabilities they've got to develop, some of these longer-term capabilities that they need -- the ability to command and control operations over these wide areas. They need some more mobile protected platforms, you know, so that they can overmatch the enemy in tactical engagements. They need some greater logistical

capabilities. And they need to develop some more experienced and effective leadership, junior leadership, sergeants -- you know, the strength of our Army. I mean, it hasn't existed in this army previously, and it takes some time to develop that. Some junior officer leadership.

But we're doing the work on all those things. And for example, we just graduated another 54 noncommissioned officers from the NCO academy that we're running here at the division headquarters at Al-Kisik. It was the second of those classes. We started an officer training class the next week.

We've got MNSTC-I, who is helping us with equipping this force better and giving them some mobile protected platforms. And we're working on the logistical and command-and-control issues.

So just, you know, as the question previously -- you know, it's not all rosy, but it's positive, it's in the right direction, and we've got to see it through. And will it take coalition forces to back up the Iraqi army until they develop those capabilities? Yes. When will the Iraqi army have those capabilities? I think we've got to understand that the future course of events depends not only on what we do but on enemy actions and initiatives, which are difficult to predict.

So I think what our Iraqi brothers need to know is, we're going to stand by them until they develop these autonomous capabilities. And we have communicated to them we're committed to doing that. And I'll tell -- our relationship is extraordinarily positive with our Iraqi army counterparts, and they're getting more effective every day.

We learn from them as much as they learn from us. And you understand what the language and cultural barriers are here. They bring a much deeper level of cultural understanding than we could achieve even through our cultural training programs.

And they bring us a tremendous infantry capability to combine with our combined arms capability within the cavalry formations that we've been employing here.

So you know, is there enough force here right now to secure this area permanently? No. Are there opportunities for the enemy in other areas within our region? Yes. But we are focused every day on taking those options away from the enemy, clearing additional areas. And the enemy is on the run. I mean, they're losing -- they don't have many places to go now. You know, they still have some places to go, but we're going to take them away from them next. And we'll continue to conduct operations in those outlying areas to disrupt their ability, until we can establish a permanent security capability with police and army.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go to Bob Burns.

Q: Colonel, Bob Burns from Associated Press. Have you captured or killed any known associates of Zarqawi in this operation? And also, as the extremists have fled the city, have they left behind -- have you found any unconventional weapons or other unusual items?

COL. MCMASTER: That's a great question. Yes, we have. We have captured many associates of Zarqawi. We have captured many of the leaders who we had targeted during this operation. And I don't know what has been released so far so I'm not going to really comment on the specifics, but we have been very effective with a broader team here and specialized capabilities to track down the enemy leadership. And this is a very important part of this campaign because these are the intimidators, these are the worst of the worst. And we have been very effective against them. They are associates of Zarqawi. They are some of the worst human beings on the face of the Earth. And it gives us no -- there is no really greater pleasure for us than to kill or capture these particular individuals.

In terms of specialized weapons, some crude attempts, I think, in the western part of the city. We've been

able to put this picture together now. The enemy had rigged a lot of buildings for destruction, and they wanted to time the destruction of these buildings with the entry of our forces. In one of these buildings the enemy had big barrels of chemicals that had explosives implanted in the chemicals, wires running around, and the whole house was rigged for demolition.

Around this house a lot of families were living. Our soldiers were conducting an area reconnaissance operation. They went into this house. Immediately their eyes began burning, their throat began burning, so they withdrew out of the house immediately and then we conducted reconnaissance with some chemical protective gear and with a remote reconnaissance capability into the house and we could tell that the thing was rigged with chemicals.

We stopped all of our operations. We were actually pursuing a particular enemy, but this was more important. We evacuated the civilians from the area and then we demolished that building without a hazard to the people.

I don't know if you've been following some of the enemy's propaganda. You know, one of the cells in this enemy's structure here, this very well developed enemy structure, is a propaganda cell. And on the sort of jihadist and extremist websites, they've been saying, you know, that coalition forces are using chemical weapons. I think what they had hoped to do was detonate this building, kill innocent civilians in this neighborhood and then blame it on coalition forces. But we preempted their ability to do that by evacuating the civilians from that building. That's one example of it.

We found some manuals that describe how they could make sort of these kind of chemical dirty bombs and so forth. But, you know, if the enemy had the capability to use it, I mean, this enemy is absolutely unscrupulous and I have no doubt that they would use it against innocent civilians and armed forces. So all the more important reason to make sure they don't have a place to develop these kind of plans, to conduct this kind of training. And that's, I think, one of the greatest success of this operation, is the safe haven is gone for them.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go over here to Jamie.

Q: Colonel, Jamie McIntyre from CNN.

Just a couple of basics: How many troops are involved in this overall operation? What is the mix between U.S. and Iraqi? And you talked about the casualties that you've inflicted on the enemy, but can you tell us what sort of casualties you've taken over these 14 days?

COL. MCMASTER: This operation includes over 5,000 Iraqi security forces; about 3,500, growing maybe to about 3,800, of our forces. That number fluctuates from day to day as units arrive and as units depart.

We have suffered casualties. It depends on what period of time to talk about the numbers of casualties. I gave you some specific numbers for a specific window of time. The most recent U.S. casualties involved one of our troopers who was killed in action in the western part of the city several days ago. Since the beginning of this operation -- you know, this operation has been going, as I mentioned, since really May -- but this focused part of the operation over the last two weeks, we've had 11 of our troopers wounded, most of whom who have courageously returned to duty to continue to pursue the enemy.

In terms of brave Iraqis who have been killed in action during this operation, it is eight of our brothers who've fallen alongside of us. They have been killed in some cowardly attacks involving a suicide bomber on one occasion, and a couple of IED attacks. Nineteen Iraqi troopers - soldiers have been wounded during this operation. And for civilians, we think that caught in the crossfire during this operation that three to six, depending on where these casualties occurred, of civilians were killed during this operation.

Now, the enemy has attacked and killed more civilians, as they had, you know, consistently in Tall Afar. I think one of the things that all of us are proudest of in this operation is how the discipline of our soldiers and their ability to overwhelm the enemy in every tactical engagement, but apply firepower with discipline and discrimination, has saved civilians' lives. I mean, far more civilians have been killed in Tall Afar on a daily basis just by the terrorists who were attacking them than have fallen during this operation itself.

So I hope that answers your question. I can probably get through -- through Bryan some more specific details in terms of time and that sort of thing, if you need that information.

MR. WHITMAN: Over here, Thom Shanker.

Q: Colonel, it's Thom Shanker from The New York Times. I know that every mission is different. But as you describe the insurgent defenses, their order of battle, where they fought and faded away, I couldn't help but hear resonance of Fallujah. I'm just curious whether the insurgency you faced in Tall Afar was the same insurgency -- broadly, of course -- whether they have grown and learned or are doing something different now. And, of course, for you, were there things that you did differently in this operation because you learned your own military's lessons of Fallujah?

COL. MCMASTER: Well, I'll tell you, we always -- we're learning every day here, you know? We learn from our fellow units, we've learned from operations in Fallujah. But we read a lot about that. We read a lot about previous operations in Tall Afar. And no, it's not the same enemy, I don't think. It's a similar enemy. It's an enemy that has combined radical Islamic extremism and influences from transnational terrorist organizations and Saddamists -- you know, former regime elements. Much of the population here who was complicit with the terrorists are former members of the old regime's Republican Guard. Many of their senior warrant officers, for example, which is equivalent to senior NCOs in our army. So you have this melding together of an extremist enemy with a significant amount of military experience.

I mean, basically, you know, in a lot of areas of this city, it was -- it was the schoolhouse for the enemy. And they would go in -- they took over schools. They would go into schools, have classes on how to do an IED. I mean, literally, chalkboards. We've got photos of students and teachers standing in front of chalkboards. And, you know, in one engagement we had about a month ago we were able to gain observation of the enemy having an IED class outside of a school with, you know, 30 people gathered around, digging up a hole, and showing how you put in an IED. Now, we disrupted their class with an artillery attack that resulted in 30 of the enemy being killed on that occasion. But it's another example of what the enemy was using this area for.

So we found these classroom environments. We found the -- you know, we found training ammunition, you know, for AK-47s, sniper manuals, mortar manuals.

And so that the function of this place was different from Fallujah, the dynamics here were completely different in terms of the nature of the operation because we had the active cooperation of such a large percentage of the population. And that's what really -- that's what really allowed us to defeat the enemy at such a low cost, was that we had very precise information.

So we knew what houses were rigged to explode, and destroyed them in advance. We knew what defensive positions they were in, and we killed the enemy in those defensive positions before we closed with them. We knew where their IEDs were in the roads, so we exploded those IEDs with helicopter fires.

Now, we're still finding, you know, more and more of these positions after the enemy attempted to retreat out of this area, and we're exploiting those areas now and developing a more full picture of what the enemy was about in this area, but -- so I would say there are similarities with the way the enemy attempted to defend here and the way the enemy defended in Fallujah, but the enemy just couldn't get there. They couldn't pull it off. And I think that a lot of that has to do with the effectiveness of Iraqi security forces operating with us. And really the

main issue, I guess, the main difference would be the access to human intelligence and the cooperation of the population.

MR. WHITMAN: We've reached the end of our time, but if I could ask you to indulge with one more question, we'll go to the Los Angeles Times.

Q: Hi, Colonel. It's Mark Mazzetti with the Los Angeles Times. You said a little while ago that right now there wasn't enough coalition force to secure the area permanently. And I'm wondering whether -- how long do you think it will take to really effectively do the hold part of the clear-and-hold operation? Is this months before Iraqis can actually hold this territory permanently? Or what's your assessment?

COL. MCMASTER: You know, I'll tell you frankly, it's difficult to predict how long it's going to take because there are so many factors that bear on this thing. It has to do a lot with how capable these forces are as we build them. So we've got to really make sure that they can withstand the enemy's intimidation.

And it has a lot to do with the enemy. I mean, one of the things we wanted to do with this operation was set conditions for the establishment of Iraqi security forces so that they get some time, some breathing space to develop some confidence, some cohesion within their police and army formations, develop some leadership, and that they're able to operate more effectively in a more permissive environment. So I don't -- I couldn't hazard a guess, because of this continuous interaction with the enemy.

You know, the progress that we're going to have in Iraq is not going to be linear. And I think everybody wants to -- or some people want to say that, you know, the enemy's, you know, enjoyed a great success somewhere because there's been an effective attack on Iraqi security forces, for example. But, I mean, that's what the enemy's job is, is to come back at us. And we've got to recognize that what we have to do is we've got to accelerate our operations against them. We've got to maintain the initiative. We've got to continue to pursue them.

And so, are we making progress in this area security-wise? Definitely. Definitely. Did we severely disrupt this enemy right here and deny them their safe haven and sort of atomize their organization, kill and capture large numbers of them, kill and capture their leadership? Yes, we did. Is it over? No. I mean, the others are going to try to come back at us. They're going to try to coalesce. They're going to try to figure out ways to come back and re-establish this intimidation campaign. But we're not going to let them do it. I mean, we're going to continue to increase our effectiveness by thinking hard about this problem, by partnering effectively with Iraqi security forces. And so, I know it's a non-answer. You know, I'm sorry, but I can't predict how long it's going to take. But I'll tell you, we're committed to doing it. Our soldiers are committed to doing it, and the Iraqi soldiers are committed to doing it.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, we want to thank you for taking the time this evening to be with us. We appreciate that you are very busy, and -- but it is very helpful for us back here to hear from commanders on the ground that are actually involved in these operations from time to time. So we thank you very much, and we wish you the best.

COL. MCMASTER: Hey, thanks. And please, everybody, just please tell the American people how great their soldiers are. You've got to tell them. I mean, it is unbelievable what they're doing. I mean -- and I know I can't keep you any longer, but I just want to tell you, they're fighting. They're defeating the enemy. They are partnered with Iraqi security forces. They're building Iraqi security force capability. They're providing humanitarian assistance. They're organizing reconstruction right now. They are taking care of the people of the city as they're pursuing the enemy. I mean, it is extraordinary the quality of the young men and women who we have here pursuing the enemies of our nation and helping to secure the people of Tall Afar and western Ninevah. So you got to tell them.

And thanks for this opportunity to talk with you.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, Colonel.

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