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Presenter: Col. H.R. McMaster, commander, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment and Multinational Force-Northwest

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News Briefing with Col. H.R. McMaster

BRYAN WHITMAN (Pentagon spokesman): Colonel McMaster (sic/McMaster), this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

COL. MCMASTER: Yes, I can, Bryan. Can you hear me?

MR. WHITMAN: We can hear you fine in here. Well thank you for joining us this afternoon. And good morning to the press corps here in the Pentagon. I think you'll recognize our briefer from back in September. This is Colonel H.R. McMasters -- McMaster. He is the commander of the 3rd ACR, Armored Cavalry Regiment. His regiment is assigned to the Multinational Division-North in Iraq, and he's currently operating from Tall Afar. He's -- as we normally do, going to give you a brief update on what his unit has been doing. The last time he talked to you they were participating in Operation Restore Rights, and that has been some time ago. And I know that he wants to bring you up to date, and then we'll take your questions.

So, Colonel, with that, I will turn it over to you.

COL. MCMASTER: Thank you. As you recall, when I discussed Tall Afar, and western Nineweh province generally, the last time I had the opportunity to speak with you, I described the area as an area that the enemy had used as kind of a support base to organize, train and equip insurgent cells for deployment in Mosul and throughout the northern region of Iraq. It was an area that the enemy was drawn to for a couple of reasons. First of all, it gave them access to external support into Syria. And also, in terms of the enemy's long-term vision for Iraq, they really want Iraq -- the enemy wants Iraq to fail, to descend into civil war, it was the perfect place to incite ethnic and sectarian conflict. And what we saw among this enemy was an alliance of convenience, really, between former regime elements, Saddamists, and Islamic extremists known as Taqfirists, who believe that not only is anyone who doesn't adhere to their narrow definition of Islam an apostate or rejectionist, but it is their duty to wage jihad against them. And this enemy was particularly brutal, and this enemy had choked the life out of the city after conducting really systematic attacks throughout the region in September of 2004.

And what the enemy really needed to do is intimidate the population of the area; to give them safe havens so people would be afraid to cooperate with our forces or Iraqi security forces to bring security to the area. They also hoped to incite sectarian violence which they did by collapsing the police force, turning the police force in effect into a sectarian militia that further fed the cycle of sectarian violence. It seemed to be going

well for the enemy as the regiment began to arrive in the area of operations in the summer of 2005. The enemy had taken over the schools, taken over the mosques. At least five civilians were being killed per day, at least that was the average, and the enemy became pretty adept also at propaganda and trying to blame the coalition forces and the Iraqi government and so forth.

But over time, people saw through this, and they had seen what this enemy had done to their city, and as a result of our combined efforts with Iraqi security forces from brave Iraqi leaders, soldiers and police, I'm happy to report to you the situation in Tall Afar and in western Nineveh has fundamentally changed. And what we have been able to achieve there together alongside our Iraqi brothers is to bring life back to this area, to rekindle hope.

We've been able to address the main grievances of the people through our operations and our other activities in the region. The first one, of course, was security based on the utter brutality of this enemy; things that this enemy did that are just difficult for us even to imagine, difficult for us to understand, those who have been in a position to witness this murderous activity.

So at first, we were able bring back security, and life returned to the city.

I'm getting an echo here. Can you guys hear that?

MR. WHITMAN: We're not hearing that here. I'm not sure that we can adjust it on your end, but we're not hearing it.

COL. MCMASTER: Okay.

So first of all, that's the first thing that the people really wanted, was security for them, for their children. And the situation is much improved. I could give you statistics and so forth, but these are changes that are very visible to us and certainly to the people of the city, who have returned to the city. People who left in the period 2004 to 2005 have come back to rebuild their lives.

Also, political participation. It was impossible for the people of Tall Afar, 75 percent of whom were Turkmen Sunna, to participate in previous elections. Now with the constitutional referendum and also with the elections in December, there was an extraordinary degree of participation. Ninety percent of the eligible voters, in fact, were able to come to the polls based on the security situation and their desire to be part of the new Iraq.

Other things that have changed are the sectarian violence is ending and we see some very encouraging signs of reconciliation. Whereas before the operation we tried very hard to rebalance the police force but, despite our efforts, only three Turkmen Sunna were able to volunteer because their families were in threat of being murdered if any of their sons or brothers or husbands joined the police force, now we are building to a police force from what was 150 and was all Shi'a to a force of 1,765, who are just about fielded now, have been equipped and are undergoing additional training and integration with the Iraqi army's and our security efforts within the city.

Basic services and reconstruction is also continuing. Whereas before the operation, only about 60 percent of the people had electricity, only 40 percent of the people had water; virtually all the city has both now because these things are now possible based on the security situation.

The most tangible thing we can see is that people are happy. Hope is rekindled. Children rush to our soldiers. People spontaneously express their gratitude to us and the Iraqi army. There are bonds of trust, mutual respect, common purpose forming between the Iraqi army and the people, and we're working on now reintroducing the police force and rebuilding its credibility after the difficult period that the city is emerging from.

Courts are back open. And again, all of this is very visible.

This was an important physical defeat for the enemy because they lost this safe haven and support base in an area that they hoped to use to destabilize the northern region of Iraq. It was also a very important psychological defeat to the enemy because people now understand that these anti-Iraqi forces want Iraq to fail. They now know, because we've been able to demonstrate our intentions with our deeds, that we, the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police, the leaders who have emerged from Tall Afar want Iraq and want Tall Afar and western Nineveh to succeed.

I know I want to get to your questions, so I'll just leave you with really what I think were four keys to our success, and then a qualifier here at the end.

The first thing is that we had complete and, I think, extraordinary unity of effort between the Iraqi leaders, the mayor, our brothers within the Iraqi army and their leadership and Iraqi police leaders. And as a result of that unity of effort, we were able to bring a population with us, which is sort of the second key to success, I think, is that the people of Tall Afar understood that this was an operation for them, an operation to bring back security to the city.

And it was their cooperation that gave us the intelligence we needed to carry out the very precise operation there and limit damage to property and so forth within the city, so life can return to normal as quickly as possible.

I think the third key was the brutality of the enemy. I mean, we ought to give the enemy credit for helping isolate themselves from this population. And their utter, utter brutality and inhumanity revealed what their true intentions were and allowed us to get after the enemy very effectively while protecting the population.

And the last key to success, I would tell you, is the disciplined dedication, the compassion, the toughness, the endurance of our soldiers. Yeah, our soldiers ought to be exhausted now, but they're not. I mean, it seems like we're gaining energy every day because we see the difference we are making in real people's lives. And I wish more of you could be here to see this rekindling of hope.

My qualifier is that this is a victory for the Iraqi people, it's a victory for the Iraqi security forces, but certainly it's a fragile victory. I mean, this is a brutal and determined enemy who wants to get back into the city, who wants to continue to brutalize these people.

And of course the standard for success for the enemy is much lower than it is for us. I mean, these are people who are willing to commit mass murder by suicide. These are people who are utterly unscrupulous. And of course what we have to do is, we have to succeed for the Iraqi people and for the future of this country.

So with that, I'll end my opening comments and see what's on your minds, see what questions you have.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, Colonel. We'll get started right here, and we'll start with Will.

Q Colonel, this is Will Dunham with Reuters. What do you forecast as the presence of the insurgency in your area, considering what's happened up till now?

And what level of violence do you think you might see there?

COL. MCMASTER: Well, I can tell you what we've experienced. In the level of violence, the average -- and you know, these statistics don't really tell you a whole lot -- of attacks per day were about seven a day, getting up to about 140-150, in one case 170 a month. Now, they're down to about 35 to 40 a month, one a day,

days without attacks. But I think what's more significant is that we initiate -- I mean, the preponderance of contacts with the enemy as we're hunting them down across the city and across the region. When I say "we", I mean, ourselves alongside the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police. And what the critical thing is, now that the pall of fear is lifted from the people, now that the intimidation is gone, they're free to cooperate, to help us help them secure their neighborhoods and secure their towns across the region.

What the enemy will try to do, I think, is to try to maintain a degree of intimidation, try to come into certain parts of the city and establish this pall of fear in a local area and begin to consolidate and form another base for action elsewhere in the city. Certainly, we know they'd like to conduct a spectacular attack, a mass murder attack, against civilians or Iraqi security forces. But what we've been able to do up to this point is preempt those attacks. Because as soon as, for example, a sniper cell moves into the city, people tell us, "Hey, these two people moved into this neighborhood. We don't know who they are. Go check them out", or they tell the Iraqi police, actually, more often. And then we immediately conduct reconnaissance to confirm or deny that report, and quite often -- most often, capture the individuals who have these designs to bring violence back to the city.

So that's what we expect is, you know, what we saw initially is the enemy was very organized before or specialized within cells, kidnapping and murder cells, mortar cells, sniper cells, and so forth. What we saw initially is a lot of these had consolidated, so you'd find in one house, you know, the propaganda material, the IED-making material, the sniper weapon, and then, obviously, we pursued this enemy.

The enemy now in the city does not have freedom of action as they did before, when they could walk openly in the streets because people were too afraid to inform on them. I mean, the enemy now -- they're pretty much -- they're skulking around like rats, you know, at night, through the wadi systems and so forth in the city. They can't be seen, because it is them who are afraid.

So -- but we anticipate that this enemy will continue to try to come back. There will continue to be violence in the city. But we're very confident now that our combined forces -- the police, the army, our forces -- can preempt those attacks. We receive most often early warning of these attacks. And we'll stay after the enemy to maintain the momentum we have, maintain the initiative and, you know, make good on our effort here in the long term, so these people, who deserve security so much, have that security, enduring security, in the city and throughout western Nineveh province.

MR. WHITMAN: Bob?

Q Colonel, this is Bob Burns from AP. What is the situation on the border, the Syrian border, now? And to what extent is Syria a sanctuary for the insurgents?

COL. MCMASTER: We -- when we first arrived in our area of operations, that's when we captured some foreign fighters, terrorists, dismantled some suicide cells and so forth. But we knew this was important, as we arrived in the area, to separate the insurgency, to separate these terrorists from sources of external support. And the external support they relied on most heavily were some specialized capabilities -- suicide bombers, some bomb-making expertise, financial support from outside.

And what we were able to do is help increase the capability of a border defense brigade, which is now positioned on the border and is increasingly effective, as we've been able to assist them in equipping that formation and training that formation.

Now they are conducting combined -- the border police are conducting combined operations alongside Iraqi army along the border, and in cooperation with local police forces. Some of the things we were able to do initially in that region were very disruptive to the enemy -- being able to dismantle facilitation cells. You know, if you come across the border into Iraq, you don't know where to go, and there's nobody there to meet you and

give you your weapons and your instructions and transport you and put you up in a safe house. It's very difficult to come into the country.

So we focused on interdictions along the border, of which we have had approaching 200 now since the regiment's arrival in May/June -- and when I say "us" -- "us" in partnership with the border police. What you'll see is that balance tipping now whereas initially, we were conducting the majority of those border interdictions. Now the Iraqi border police are conducting the majority of those interdictions.

But again, another critical element of this was to provide security throughout our area in the towns and villages, dismantle, you know, the false passport shops, you know, the weapons outfitters and so forth, so when the terrorists come in, you know, they just don't know where to go. And I think that that has had a very disruptive effect on the enemy's ability to access external support into Syria.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, we'll move over here to Jamie and then back over to Anne.

Q Colonel, it's Jamie McIntyre from CNN.

You said that your troops should be exhausted, but they're not. I'm just curious -- how many rotations have they -- how many tours have they served in Iraq? And as a front line commander, I'd just be interested in your insight on whether you believe that the constant rotation into what is a tough war zone here risks breaking the force down the road, as several reports released here in Washington suggested this week.

COL. MCMASTER: Yeah, the vast majority of the troopers in the 3rd Cavalry are here for their second time.

They were back for a year in between those two missions from what, you know, people call OIF-1. The regiment initially operated in a very wide area, in Al Anbar Province, a very difficult and complex area, and then came back for this mission, arriving in theater around February-March of 2004.

And our soldiers understand their duty. They understand that the future course of events in this war depended not only on our plans for troop levels and so forth, but they also depended on enemy actions, which were unpredictable. And in 2004, I think it was a period of reassessment and the regiment was needed to deploy to Iraq for an important mission sooner. And as I tell our troopers, you know, when you've got a situation like that, who do you call? You call the cavalry. And these troopers answered that call. They have performed with great distinction.

And I think the disadvantages of service, you know, they're obviously in the face of our soldiers. You know, it's separation from family, it's the arduous duty, certainly it's the risks they're taking, the sacrifices they're making. But what you don't see -- I mean, it's harder for you to see -- are the intangible rewards. I mean, our soldiers know that they are part of an important mission that is larger than themselves. They know they're part of a mission that is important to bring freedom and security to 26 million people, that's something worth getting behind, as well as securing the future of our own children against these terrorists and murderers who believe that no Western ideas, no Westerners -- no Americans, in particular, are innocents.

Our soldiers also reap the benefits from being part of a team, really a family, where we're bound together by mutual -- they have a mutual purpose, but really respect and affection for one another, teams in which the man next to you is literally willing to give everything, including his life, for you.

And to be part of something like that, to be part of a, you know, our army, to be part of this calvary regiment or calvary troop or a scout platoon it gives you these sort of intangible rewards.

Now, are our professional commitments as soldiers out of whack with our family and personal lives for these troopers? I mean, certainly they are, but you know it's wartime, and our troopers understand it. And as we approach the end of this mission, as our soldiers have seen what they have accomplished, these -- I think, and I know our soldiers would tell you as well, that these intangible rewards are balancing out those sacrifices that they've made. And I believe that in the coming years, there will be opportunity based on what our Army's doing, based on what we're achieving here to rebalance personal lives and family lives with professional commitments.

So I know you guys see the downside. I mean, our troopers see it too. I mean, it's in their face, and they miss their families, they miss their kids, but I mean, these are just great Americans. I mean, these are I think the finest people our nation has, and they see the benefits of their service as well and that compensates to a certain degree.

Q Hi, Sir. Ann Tyson from The Washington Post. You said that there were some encouraging signs of reconciliation and redirection in sectarian fallouts. Can you talk about that a little bit more? And just a minor question, is the court trying terrorist cases now?

COL. MCMASTER: Okay. In terms of reconciliation, what we have seen that's most encouraging is, you know, we initially tried to facilitate this and our squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel Chris Hickey, our Sabre Squadron commander did a great job in arranging some of these initial meetings between parties that were utterly opposed to one another and engaging in a degree of tribal and sectarian violence incited, you know, by al Qaeda in Iraq and in this -- the franchise of al Qaeda in Iraq in this area called Battalions of the One True God.

But what happened is, you know, the Iraqi leaders, the -- you know, the people who have influence in their communities, they recognized what was happening. I mean, they saw what these terrorists' designs were, and that they were sort of being played by the terrorists in this thing.

So we began to see the Iraqis taking more and more ownership of this reconciliation process, meeting on their own, for example. You know, I'm not going to tell you that it's not acrimonious when they meet, but it ends in embraces and a resolve to reconcile with one another.

The other good sign is how well the Iraqis are working together on the police force and also the resettlement of some families. You know, when the security situation collapsed, some of these communities sort of fell in on themselves within Tall Afar. We have recently resettled a hundred Shi'a families back up into what was a mixed neighborhood on the west side of the city. We have done that with the encouragement, approval of leaders on both sides, and under the watchful eye of these leaders, as well as Iraqi security forces. Another is addressing grievances with previous police abuse, which is continuing.

Now as far as the court system and the important effort to establish Iraqi rule of law in the area, it is slow progress, but it is progress. The judges are applying a standard consistent with what we consider due process of law.

And so a new Iraqi police force is developing an investigative capability. Twenty Iraq police investigators just arrived back. The city has hired two attorneys to sort of form kind of a district attorney's office to help prepare evidence and packets to go before the judge. So that is an ongoing effort, and I'm not going to tell you that that is anywhere near done.

The other important thing is we have to make sure the security situation continues to improve because, obviously, these judges are likely targets of intimidation. So they have to be able to make their decisions free of the enemy's intimidation which is, you know, an important consideration when fighting a counterinsurgency like

this.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go to Pam.

Q Colonel McMaster, it's Pam Hess with UPI. I want to start by saying how sorry I was to hear about your troopers in the Blackhawk.

It appears that you guys fell in on a pretty hairy situation. And I think through your numbers and the operations that you've been conducting, you seem to have turned things around. You're coming back soon. What's the plan on replacing you all? Is it going to be the kind of numbers that you are now? And you said it would be -- that what you have now is a fragile victory. And I'm wondering if there's not going to be a similar situation to what there was before you got there, or when the 101st left and wasn't replaced by a very large group and there was vast areas of uncontrolled territory.

COL. MCMASTER: Right. Well, as you mentioned, what the enemy saw before was an opportunity and tried to seize on it. We're all committed to not give the enemy that opportunity again. So the force that's replacing us has very similar capabilities. They're an extraordinarily experienced and just a great organization. I know many of their leaders personally and, you know, couldn't have picked better guys to come in and continue with our efforts. So in terms of our continuing efforts in that region, there's not going to be any kind of degree of drop-off in effort.

Now, over time we should be able to reduce our forces. And what I think we've been able to achieve together with our Iraqi partners here is set conditions for reduction of forces in the long term.

But, you know, there are some long-term capabilities within Iraqi security forces that have to be developed prior -- you know, to being able to disengage. But those judgments will be up to the next commander who comes in. He will come in with certainly the capability to continue what we have achieved alongside the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police and the Iraqi civil leaders in the region.

MR. WHITMAN: Tom?

Q Colonel, yeah, Tom Bowman with the Baltimore Sun.

You're a historian in the Vietnam war, and what you're trying to do over there is what Creighton Abrams attempted in Vietnam -- clear and hold. It's clearly manpower intensive. I now want to get you to talk about the Iraqi security forces -- how many more do you see necessary in your area? You know, if you can give us a ballpark number or percentage increase. And also, if you can talk about the build part of your effort -- a lot of that money for rebuilding has been siphoned off for security, and just talk about the need in your area and a ballpark on the dollar amount if you can estimate that.

COL. MCMASTER: Okay, you know, in terms of, you know, clear and hold as a counterinsurgency approach -- I mean, that is essential, I guess, in general. You could characterize our efforts as such. And we -- all of our military operations were not, you know, just oriented on the enemy.

They were also designed to set conditions for the introduction of Iraqi security forces into those areas such that there could be permanent security there.

How many more forces? I think some more police forces, and we're recruiting and reconstituting those now. It's not necessarily the number as it is strengthening those organizations such that they can conduct independent operations.

So some of the things that take longer to develop within any organization, you know, the logistical capabilities, you know, the personal management promotion systems, junior leadership capabilities. You know, we are working with Iraqis to develop more knowledgeable and effective sergeants and lieutenants and captains, and so what began as U.S.-led leadership schools are now Iraqi-led leadership schools, where they are the instructors. And -- but, of course, it takes time to develop some of these longer-term capabilities. So I think it's not as much the case of numbers now in our area as it is strengthening the existing numbers and giving them more of an independent capability.

In terms of what follows operations like this and really what has to be integrated with them in terms of reconstruction and stimulating economic activity and building good governance and so forth, you're exactly right. I mean, that's a very important dimension to this thing. We have received, I think, great support to generate that momentum. I mean, in our area 35 education projects have been completed. I know these numbers don't mean as much as the effects, but tremendous effects on the communities, you know, getting water to the whole city of Tall Afar, electricity; seeing kids go back to school when they haven't been able to go back to school and that brought back a sense of normalcy; park construction, where there was just sort of a debris associated with terrorist attacks in the past. And really I think the Iraqi government has made a commitment of a large amount of money for reconstruction in Tall Afar, already committed 7 million of that money.

And now it's a question of getting the systems in place to award contracts, monitor the work being done to increase Iraqi government reconstruction. Our -- the coalition has provided for initial reconstruction, particularly of police stations, which were all rubble by the terrorists in September of 2004.

New police stations are already open. Others are under construction, municipal buildings and so forth. So you're right, the reconstruction effort is immensely important.

And anybody out there who wants to invest in Tall Afar, I encourage you to do so, because the people need jobs and they need hope for the future, and the security situation supports that now. And we're doing everything we can to facilitate the investment of Iraqi government and other money to help these people who've suffered for so long.

MR. WHITMAN: We've got time for probably just one more. Jeff, why don't you be the last one here?

Q Gordon Lubold from Army Times. Colonel, you mentioned receiving tips and what-not from the Iraqi people in the area. I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about just from a practical standpoint, how are those tips received? Received directly from the Iraqi people to you guys, or through the police or security forces? And then just can you describe an instance in which perhaps security forces or police would go out and respond to that tip, perhaps on their own, or do you always accompany them?

COL. MCMASTER: Sure. The tips come from a variety of means. We have a -- we call it a Joint Coordination Center in Tall Afar that now is a --it's combined sort of command post and intelligence-sharing facility with the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police, our forces, there's a public works desk in there and so forth.

So a lot of tips are telephoned in. Others are while your police and army are out on patrols. And also, we are living in the city with them and have very close access to the population. So a lot of them are walk-ups to Iraqi army and police. Hey, guys, I could list, you know, 40 examples of times when that intelligence is received and the Iraqi army and police respond to it immediately.

I mean, one dramatic case -- we had 60-millimeter mortars fired indiscriminately into a neighborhood of the city. Immediately there was a telephone tip. And you know, the police are charging out of the police station, and we're asking, "Hey, where are you guys going?" And then we caught up with the intelligence and moved into

a position to support them, which, it turns out, they really didn't need. They captured the mortar tube, conducted questioning of people in the neighborhood, who pointed out the offending individuals, and then captured them as well. I mean, it was that fast.

So there are many, many examples of that. And it's happening every single day across the city, as one of the most obviously encouraging things in terms of every time an attack occurs.

Another dramatic example would be, you know, immediately after Operation Restoring Rights, you'll recall that the enemy conducted a mass murder attack in a marketplace. And you know, before -- you know, before Restoring Rights, you know, we would have -- you know, we've had a hard time, working through interpreters, building relationships in the neighborhoods around there, what happened -- immediately we had a flood of intelligence to the newly reconstituted or work-in-progress still police force and the Iraqi army. We were able to pursue the suicide cell and capture the individuals responsible for that attack. And we caught them in the act of planning a suicide vest attack on election day and preempted that attack. So lots and lots of examples of how that's working.

To go back to the previous question, I also just want to put a plug in for the Office of Transition Initiatives as well, from State Department, who helped us tremendously with really rapidly making a difference in the city. And of course what we're all endeavoring to do now is to bridge this -- what -- you know, our reconstruction efforts and efforts to address the grievances of the population into more permanent solutions in governance, in economic development and so forth.

Short term, it's going great. And now we're working with the Iraqi government and others to make a lot of these improvements more permanent in the city.

Q Bryan?

MR. WHITMAN: Colonel, I know I said that was the last one, but Pam has just one tiny clarifying question she would like to ask.

Q The police force -- could you give us the breakdown ethnically? You said what it started out as, but not what it is now.

COL. MCMASTER: Yeah, you know, I can't give you the exact numbers; I can't remember. But it's the vast majority, so I hate to even throw out a number. But it's generally representative of the population. You know, I mentioned that the population within Tall Afar, for example, was about 70 to 75 percent Turkmen Sunna, with about 25 percent Turkmen Shi'a. But there are also -- you know, there are Kurds, and Izedis, and so forth, in the city as well. But it is representative, I can tell you that for sure. I don't have the exact number with me. But it's something we were concerned about and track pretty closely. So it was successful. I mean, there was a flood of recruits, not only for the police, but for the army as well, after the operation, because people felt free to -- you know, to do what they want -- whatever they could do to help secure their people.

I'll tell you one quick story, if you guys have time. I was patrolling after an attack on police recruits. It was a suicide attack immediately after the operation. And I was walking with a small element up the street of Hasan Koy, which previously was a hostile area. I saw an Iraqi coming toward me on crutches, a young man, and I thought, well, is this an insurgent, a terrorist who we wounded? So I went up to him and started asking him some questions. It turns out he was wounded in that attack where he was waiting in line to be recruited for the Iraqi police. He was now walking on crutches across town to join the Iraqi army so he could defeat these terrorists and bring security to his family.

I mean, I guess what people don't get to see is, they don't get to see how resolute and how determined

these courageous Iraqis are. And the other thing I wish we could communicate more clearly is the relationships we've developed with people. I mean, we've made lifetime friends among the good Iraqi people. So the Iraqi people you tend to see most on coverage, I think is just natural, are the ones, you know, who are conducting attacks against us, and so forth. But there are so many good people in this country who deserve security and who are doing everything they can to build a future for their families, their towns and their country.

MR. WHITMAN: Colonel, we've reached the end of our time, but I wanted to give you an opportunity to have the last word, if there's something you wanted to tell us.

COL. MCMASTER: I think it's pretty much the same since I told you before. I hope you tell our troopers' families how awesome they are. I mean, I hope in some way you can communicate that to them. I know it may not fit in on whatever you're covering at this point, but they ought to know the job that their soldiers are doing, and the wide range of responsibilities they've taken on. And they ought to understand, you know, their courage, you know, how tough they are in combat, but also how compassionate and how disciplined they are. I mean, there are people in the neighborhoods where we're living who are naming their children after our soldiers, you know? And I know people don't see that. And they ought to know that their soldiers are proud of what they're accomplishing every day. They're drawing strength from seeing that, and they're drawing strength as always on each other and the cohesive team and family they're part of.

So anyway, I just hope you can tell people how great their soldiers are. I know the American people are grateful for their service, and it is a tremendous privilege for me to serve alongside of them.

Thanks.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you. We know that you and your unit are coming to the end of your tour soon, and we appreciate both these opportunities we've had to talk to you. There's no doubt that the success of your unit and the accomplishments that they've had are certainly a reflection of your motivation, your energy and your dynamic leadership, so thank you again for spending some time with us, and our best wishes as you complete your tour there.

COL. MCMASTER: Thank you. Thanks for the privilege of being here with you.

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