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**Presenter: Lieutenant General Lance Smith, CENTCOM
Deputy Commander**

**Wednesday, December 15, 2004 10:35 a.m.
EST**

Special Defense Department Briefing on CENTCOM Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan

BRYAN WHITMAN (Pentagon spokesman): Good morning again, and I thank you for your perseverance. This is our third briefing and it's only 10:30. So I know you all have been up early and there's a lot of information being provided today about our operations in Iraq.

And today General Lance Smith, the deputy commander of CENTCOM, has agreed to come back -- so you weren't too hard on him a couple weeks ago when he was here, a few weeks ago when he was here -- and give you an overview of operations particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan today.

So with that, I won't take up any more time, sir.

GEN. SMITH: Thank you.

Good morning. It's great to be back in D.C. We're enroute right now to go back to the theater, so we'll leave tonight and this is an opportunity for me to come through.

We're actually here working some coordination issues with counternarcotics in Afghanistan and some of the counterterrorist financing as well as some IED issues. So I spent yesterday meeting with the Drug Enforcement Agency and Department of Treasury, and then this morning with Justice and yesterday with DIA as well. So if you have any questions on this and at least how we see the counternarcotics issue in Afghanistan, I'll be glad to answer any of those, even though we're not the lead on that.

Since I last saw you all, I think both the boss and I, General Abizaid and I spent some fair amount of time over in the theater having Thanksgiving with the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. And I think our report is, as much as our troops are sacrificing, that probably the toughest time for them is when the holiday season is on them. But morale is high, the support they're getting is great, turkeys and decorations and stuff all over the mess halls, and the troops are doing good. And they will get the same kind of stuff over Christmas. We'll sort of reverse this time. I'll go to Afghanistan for Christmas, and the boss will go to Iraq.

Things are going very well in Afghanistan. We had a big week with the inauguration; another, I think, very large success in the way of security and moving ahead for the government of Afghanistan. President Karzai is currently in the process of trying to put together his Cabinet. He will spend some time doing that, very delicate issues for him having to deal with ethnic differences and at the same time trying to put together a Cabinet that

reflects his goals for where he wants Afghanistan to go.

But that's not to say that all the fighting has stopped. We've had some engagements out in the eastern part of Afghanistan just in the last few days, two engagements, I think two days ago, where we killed about six folks, either al Qaeda or Taliban, that were trying to engage our troops out in the area. And we expect that will continue for a little bit as we try to prevent insurgents from, you know, putting any safe havens into Afghanistan or going into safe havens as they go into the winter months. And so things should quiet down a little bit there as the snows start to fall. But there will be continued efforts, particularly in the southeast, with the Taliban trying to impact the elections that will occur either in the -- the spring, right now. And we hope they will not be delayed, but there are no guarantees. That will be up to the government of Afghanistan.

Very good news conference or two days of work from President Karzai as he recognizes the problems with the narcotics piece in Afghanistan. And that's a concern for all the nations in the area. And what we're trying to do in Central Command is make sure that there's a regional strategy that brings in the other countries that are very concerned about the drug problem, like Pakistan and Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, all those countries, where we see routes for the drugs going into Russia and Europe. They're all very concerned, and so we will work with them to try and make sure that we're doing what we can to prevent the problems that they've got.

Our issues with the Drug Enforcement Agency, who's got the U.S. lead for counternarcotics, along with the United Kingdom, who's got the coalition lead, is an effort to try and make sure that they leverage the capability we have in theater and that we're providing the support that we can to ensure they have success in there.

In Iraq, things continue. Fallujah, as you all are very well aware, continues with some very isolated pockets of resistance.

We did lose some Marines in Fallujah over the weekend and in the process killed 30 to 40 ACM, anti-coalition militia insurgents. And you know, the numbers may be larger. We just can't count them. We did use some bombs on some buildings, and really no good battle damage assessment from those buildings, other than they were effective in stopping the fighting in those areas.

No absolute date for when the citizens will be able to return, but work in Fallujah is ongoing. There's some water damage that are in the streets, that we are working to get rid of, moving rubble around. There are contractors and people from the Ministry of Interior operating in there. And I said, no exact date. We would hope within the next week or so that we would be able to let people move back in, but that will -- it's totally conditions-based on when we think we can -- when it's safe enough for them to go back in.

We continue to move down the road on -- towards elections in January. We have heard rumors, just like you have. Clearly there are people -- some that would like, especially in the Sunni community, to delay the elections. But that is certainly not our intent. We think elections need to go in January, as the president has also indicated.

And it's worth reminding that the fights that we've got going where we have the security problems right now really are in four of the 18 provinces. In 14 of those provinces we could probably have elections tomorrow. But it is absolutely clear that the insurgents will make every effort to try and make these elections as difficult as possible and try to force a delay. And our job is to try and make sure that that doesn't happen, and we will continue to try to stay offensive and go after these people that want to disrupt the election, and then at the same time, work with the Iraqi security forces to ensure that they have both the number of forces and the training and the capability to provide security when we actually get to the elections.

And this business about expanding the period of time over elections is under discussion. I don't know how serious that is. But I have heard it, and you know, maybe it makes sense, maybe it doesn't make sense. We'll know a lot more as we get closer and closer to the election period. And I know you all saw General Sattler's -- or reporting on General Sattler's comments about Al Anbar province, but he sees progress there in being able to establish registration areas. And he believes that we'll be able to provide security by January so that they can vote there as well. So we will continue that.

Our goal is to ensure success. There has been really an incredible amount of interest in the political business and everybody putting together their list. As you know, today is the last day for them to identify themselves and register their political parties, and that continues as they refine their list. At least two major Sunni political parties have -- are playing in the process and have identified lists, and there is a lot of undercurrent in the Sunni community that -- where people are interested in participating. We just don't know how large that is or how much that will grow as we move towards January; nor do we know how effective the intimidation campaign will be as it continues.

And with that, I'll open the floor to any questions you may have. Yes, sir?

Q General, as a senior officer of CENTCOM, are you concerned that only about 61 percent of the tactical U.S. vehicles in Iraq are now protected by armor? I realize you're making concerted efforts to improve that, but are you concerned at the current level?

GEN. SMITH: I mean, we're always concerned. I mean, we -- this requirement has increased as the enemy's tactics have increased. We've now got a very large requirement. We didn't have the same requirement a year ago. And that has increased as the enemy has changed his tactics. He has recognized that he cannot take us on in a direct fight. He loses every time. So he has chosen to operate in our rear areas and use improvised explosive devices to attack us in the rear area. And in doing that, it's changed the way we have to armor our vehicles that normally would operate pretty freely in the rear area and wouldn't require armor.

So that is a change. So yes, we're concerned that he has changed his tactics, and it's required us to armor vehicles that might otherwise not armor.

At the same time, it's worth noting that not every vehicle in Iraq needs to be armored. You know, the vehicles that operate on the installations are generally not going to be armored. I would tell you that down on the southern areas, where the United Kingdom operates, they aren't going through a huge thrash to try and armor every vehicle. And frankly, in those 14 provinces where we get less than four activities a day, it may not be required that every vehicle there be armored as well.

So, yes, but we are growing to the capability that I think we need to have, and doing it pretty rapidly.

Q Are these IEDs -- excuse me, just a brief one -- are these IEDs slowing down operations at all --

GEN. SMITH: Sure, they are.

Q -- be they offensive, be they movement of equipment for reconstruction?

GEN. SMITH: They are. I mean, they cause us to reroute vehicles. They cause us to have to employ tactics, although the tactics are generally successful in avoiding them, using speed and maneuverability and protection vehicles and the like, and cause us to have to convoy, where maybe otherwise we would prefer to move in smaller numbers. So it is having an impact.

Q General, can I ask you a question about the insurgents? There's been a fair amount of discussion in

recent weeks about whether -- who these insurgents are. Are these, you know, the former regime, the Ba'athists, or is this a sort of Sunni insurrection that could, in fact, evolve into a civil war? There have been some incidents of sectarian violence recently. I wonder what your assessment is, and does it matter for U.S. tactics, for coalition tactics whether it's a Sunni uprising or it's Ba'athists or whatever?

GEN. SMITH: I would not characterize it at this stage as a Sunni uprising. In fact, what you're seeing out there is Sunni killing Sunni. We would identify the folks that we're fighting in two different categories: those that are hard-core terrorists, like Zarqawi, in that group, that include some number of foreign fighters, but he has done a good job of co-opting a number of disenfranchised Iraqis into his camp. And those are the ones that are involved or at least taking credit for many of these very visible operations with the VBIEDs and the killing of large numbers of people.

The former regime elements have a similar goal in ensuring our failure, or trying to ensure failure. But in the long term, their goal is different. And that is, their goal is to -- and I shouldn't characterize it, by the way, just as Sunni -- Sunni Ba'athists -- that understand that they're not going to rule, and they would like to rule again and they're not willing to give up power at this stage. So they see the fight as one of trying to restore Ba'athist power, and they see no other way to operate within that government, which puts a demand on Prime Minister Allawi to ensure he can show that there is a place for them in the future of Iraq.

Q What's the source of these sectarian clashes, and what do you do to prevent this from evolving into a civil war?

GEN. SMITH: I'm not sure what sectarian clashes --

Q Well, I think up in Mosul there was sort of a gunfight between Sunni Arabs and Kurds, and I believe there was a similar incident --

GEN. SMITH: Both of whom are Sunni, by the way.

Q Right. And that there was a similar incident between the Sunni and Shi'a down south of Baghdad, I can't remember, it may have been --

GEN. SMITH: Clearly, there are some force-on-force engagements where they -- but we never know, really, if that is Sunni (via ?) Shi'a, or tribal, or what it happens to be. But all of them have different interests.

But I personally -- and you might get a different view from other folks -- but I don't think in CENTCOM that we see this as a Sunni uprising, nor do we see this as -- we see both sides have been pretty patient, I think, in trying to ensure that this does not end up being a Shi'a against Sunni effort; albeit Zarqawi, clearly, in his letter and his philosophy would try and make it that way. So he will blow up some mosques or kill Shi'a in an effort to try and cause the kind of thing that you're talking about. But the Shi'a, in my view, are not prepared to take that on and don't want that to happen, so they're doing a very good job of trying to avoid allowing Zarqawi to meet his goals.

Yes, sir?

Q Yes, when do you anticipate the U.S. troop strength reaching 150,000 in Iraq? And if the elections are delayed or take place over a long period of time, how long do you think you can sustain that level?

GEN. SMITH: We're at, I think, about 148,000 today. So it's just a matter of troop flow in and out. That 2,000 could happen tomorrow, could happen in another couple of weeks.

Q Will you reach higher than the 150,000 or do you think that --

GEN. SMITH: I don't know exactly what the number will be, but it will be very close to 150,000.

Q And how long do you think you can sustain that, given that this is on the backs of people who thought they were leaving?

GEN. SMITH: We have more or less told those folks, as we've extended the ones that have been over there for some period of time, to some period of time shortly after the elections. Whether that's February or March would be dependent on the unit. But as the chairman indicated, we would see some level of decline when the conditions permit. Our intent is not to try and sustain that level, but that presumes some reasonable success in getting the election.

Now as far as stretching it out, I think we've -- in anything that I have heard about how they would stretch it out, that would not impact that number. It is over a period of weeks or whatever. And I don't know exactly how they would do it if they were going to do it.

Q It would be within the window of the extension?

GEN. SMITH: It would be in the window of the extension.

Q Okay.

GEN. SMITH: And so I think we're okay there.

Q Yesterday there was an announcement of the next package of troops going over. Can you give us a sense of what capabilities you asked for and how was it reflected in the composition of forces yesterday? It seemed to be a mix of not so much heavy, a lot of light, more mobile. What was the theory behind the composition of forces?

GEN. SMITH: I can't tell you exactly, but what we are looking for is exactly what you said, more boots on the ground, more capability to provide the kind of relief forces and stuff so that we can move into a local control, if you will, as the Iraqis take on more of the security inside the cities and the stuff than they are right now, where we can be responsive and mobile and be able to support them as they require assistance. And that will continue to be that way as we move towards things like regional control, where they're able to handle all but the larger sorts of things, the riots. And that, of course, has been our dilemma up to now, is not just training the Iraqi security forces and equipping them, but allowing them to get the unit cohesion that allows them to take on those roles. And it has clearly happened slower than we would like. But the makeup of the forces is really designed to support those folks.

Q On the force protection one, we haven't heard much about vests lately.

GEN. SMITH: Everybody has vests.

Q So that's not an issue anymore?

GEN. SMITH: That's not an issue. The issue as much as anything else is Iraqis getting vests and getting the higher-level vests. But coalition members all have vests. We are now working on new things that provide protection for the arms and the legs, and that will be the next issue as far as getting them even better protection than they have right now. But there's nobody going over there without a vest.

Q Back to the shape of the enemy. While it's a guess, do you have a percentage of what you're looking at as far as the Zarqawi group compared to the former regime elements, a breakdown of what kind of numbers you're looking at?

GEN. SMITH: I don't. I think the former regime element is considerably larger, in that it's made up of sort of two groups, maybe even three groups: those that are active folks that are going out there and conducting actions, the folks that are attacking and killing folks; those that passively sit by or support; and then those that are just sitting on the fence and don't know which side to go. And I would say that there are a great number of folks in those areas that you've always heard about, in Fallujah, Ramadi, Tikrit, in large numbers in Mosul, that fit into one of those three categories.

The numbers in the terrorist thing I think are quite small. Now, whether that means that there is a thousand or two thousand, I can't tell you. We get surprised every time we go into this stuff. We don't know exactly who it was that we killed in the thousands that we killed in Fallujah, but there are a number of both pieces of that.

I will tell you we are actively taking down the leadership of Zarqawi's team, and we continue to do that, and every time we do it, we get a little closer to him.

Q Do you have specific information, maybe new information, about the role Syria and Iran are playing in this insurgency?

GEN. SMITH: No. And the reason I don't is because, as you know, our intelligence functions on that side of the fence are very difficult because of -- especially on the Iranian side -- because of lots of the different ways they have to get in and out of the country.

And also it's very difficult to gauge what the Iranian influence is when -- I know there are concerns that the Shi'a are being unduly influenced and there is some concern about the -- whatever the list is called, I think it's the Unified Iraqi Alliance or something like that that is more or less the list from Sistani, that that has some number of folks that may or may not be influenced by Iran in it. But it's difficult to gauge where that's real, because it's worth remembering that some are Persian Shi'a and some are Iraqi Shi'a and the two don't necessarily fit into the same box. So there is influence. There is an intent for Iran to influence things there. How, the size of that, is not clear.

We have reports that the president of Syria, al-Assad, has stated categorically that he will not support those that are supporting the insurgency, and reports that he has arrested something on the order of 1,000 to 2,000 folks that have been trying to go across the border. Difficult for us to confirm that, but it is clear to us that there is still a significant amount of activity going on in Syria as far as financial support and the movement of foreign fighters into and out of Iraq. We don't think that's sanctioned by the highest levels of government, and we don't really know what the knowledge level of -- is that, I mean, as you know, there's 2,000 years of smuggling routes through there that are difficult to control.

Q If you'll just indulge me, I just want to clean up one thing from yesterday. Afghan officials came out and said that they -- their forces had captured two Taliban commanders, and one of them being the personal security chief of Mullah Mohammed Omar. Do you know that to be true?

GEN. SMITH: I don't know that to be true. I heard the same thing, I saw the same thing, and I don't have an intelligence report sitting on my desk that says that that happened.

Q Sir?

GEN. SMITH: Yes, ma'am?

Q Six months ago, the military assessment of the insurgency was that it was in random cells that weren't very coordinated, but to an observer it seems like they're getting more coordinated. Have they -- have the former regime elements part of this insurgency coalesced under any kind of central organization?

GEN. SMITH: I don't think if you went out there you would find a vertical chain of command where there is one person calling the shots, but I do think there is an effort out there, and we've seen the results of it, in trying to coordinate some activities between the various elements that are out there. Now who's doing that? I'm not sure. Certainly the elements on the terrorist side, the Zarqawi side, are more coordinated than we think the activities of the former regime elements. But we don't see, for instance, former regime element coordination in Fallujah being coordinated with those that are happening in Mosul, albeit there might be a general word out there that during this period of time we need to create as much disruption as possible.

Terry?

Q There have been a couple of car bombings just outside the Green Zone. I believe both of them were claimed by Zarqawi. Is that an indication -- I mean, do you now believe that he's been able to reestablish his operations since Fallujah? And what's the picture there in terms of the people who were dispersed from Fallujah? Have they succeeded in, you know, regaining their footing and planning again?

GEN. SMITH: I don't think so. Now I mean, you know from the reports that we had before what we found in Fallujah was VBIED factories and command-and-control setups that I don't think he can resurrect any place in the way that he did in Fallujah. That is not to say that there are no other places where VBIEDs can be built, nor is that to say that there weren't a number that were already built. We do get some fairly good human intelligence that there are vehicles that have been identified to be VBIEDs and that they have been out there. So for him to be able to direct that -- I mean even a month ago -- and say, "Okay, your job is to take this VBIED and go bomb the queue at the Green Zone," it doesn't really take a huge command and control effort or a good capability to be able to do that.

He no doubt maintains communications with key elements of his leadership and is able to continue some level of command and control over the disparate operations. It is just far more difficult to do now because they can't do it, generally speaking, via electronic means. They do it by meeting in cars and driving around and giving guidance and doing all that stuff. So it is difficult for them. But I would say he has not been emasculated. I mean, he is still capable of conducting operations.

Q Do you believe he's still operating within Iraq?

GEN. SMITH: I believe he's still operating within Iraq.

Q Do you have a sense where at this point?

GEN. SMITH: You know, Baghdad would be the most likely area, but these guys are getting very, very good at concealing -- or making it difficult for us to track them. And so what we use for the most part is human intelligence, and that's difficult because sometimes it ages, and sometimes it's rumor; sometimes somebody's trying to get money or get attention and you're never sure what their reason is for telling you stuff. But he can operate pretty safely, we think. In some areas of Baghdad there are those that would hide him and those that would passively allow him to operate. You can find him someplace else tomorrow.

Q General --

Q So it's probably tempting, sir --

Q I'm sorry.

GEN. SMITH: Go ahead.

Q I'm sorry. When you say this and you say that you've been taking his network apart, and every time you take a piece down you feel you get closer, and you say you feel it's most likely he's operating in Baghdad safely or with safe haven, one has to ask: How close are you?

GEN. SMITH: I mean -- great question, and I don't know. You know, the way you try to do this stuff is you try to get as close as you can to him and use whatever intelligence you have and try to act on that intelligence quickly, because it's very fleeting, and there is a certain amount of freedom of movement on the part of these folks. And you know, if they get warning -- it is very difficult. And so, you know, you're right. We do say we get closer and get closer. All I can tell you is some of his key lieutenants are no longer operating. But again, the guys are smart. They've learned an awful lot in not telling their own people how they're operating, and they change their tactics, techniques and procedures very rapidly. And that's the strength of an insurgency is their ability to change rapidly, because they can do it tonight if they want to. Something didn't work today, they can change the way they do business tonight.

Q Can I just follow up very briefly? You also said a couple minutes ago that the insurgency had to some extent slowed some or changed or slowed some coalition operations -- how you convoy, how you operate. Can you quantify that at all? In other words, is the insurgency having a significant impact on coalition operations?

And yesterday, General Jumper indicated that the Air Force is now stepping in. Are we going to see cargo air drops? Are we going to see C-130s landing on roads to avoid convoys?

GEN. SMITH: We have already -- that has already been undertaken -- not the stuff that you just said but as far as moving stuff to airplanes. I can't give you the numbers, but you know, hundred and hundreds of truck loads of stuff have been moved in the past three or four weeks to cargo airplanes to take some of those -- to relieve some of the pressure on the truck convoys. And the reason I can't give you a number is it's hard to gauge. But you know, a lot of the stuff we were moving by ground was water and fuel, and some of that stuff we will take and we'll start moving at least closer to where it needs to be, so that -- it may still have to be moved by ground, but it will be moved in a much shorter distance than taking it into LSA Anaconda, for instance, up in Balad, and having to drive all the way to Ar Ramadi. We --

Q Why did it take so long to start using airplanes for this?

GEN. SMITH: Well, actually, we've been using airplanes all along to move stuff. It's just been a balance between what is getting transported on the ground and what's getting transported in the air. And I don't think -- I mean, there -- we will not be able to take everything and move it to the air. But it will relieve some of the stuff that we're moving on the ground.

Moving it on the ground isn't a completely bad thing, and certainly a lot of things almost have to be moved on the ground -- refrigerated kind of stuff that -- you know, that requires stuff that airplanes can't do.

Q Can I follow up on that?

Q Following up -- excuse me --

Q Can I follow up on that? General Jumper was saying that he was on a recent trip to Iraq, and he wasn't very happy with the lack of communication, he said, between the Air Force and the Army over this issue. He was saying he thought 350 truckloads per day could be moved by air, ramping up to, I think, 1,500 to 2,000 per day. Do you expect to ramp it up to that much?

GEN. SMITH: I don't know. I mean, that's -- I'm a bad person to ask that question to, only because I don't -- I can't even tell you exactly how many truck movements are going on, on a day-to-day basis. Our director of logistics could probably tell you, and I can probably find that out.

Q And he was saying what's driving this is clearly some of the dangerous convoys this year.

GEN. SMITH: That's right. And -- but --

Q And if so, what does that say if you have to airlift stuff in a year and a half after the fall of Baghdad? What does that say about the growing power of the insurgency and the stubbornness of the insurgency?

GEN. SMITH: Well, I mean, what they have done is sort of like I said earlier. I mean, when we started this insurgency, this was a force-on-force kind of stuff. They would come out, and they'd engage with us, and we'd kill a lot of them, and they'd go back and come back and fight another day. And that has been a totally unsuccessful method of operation for them.

So they have had a growing understanding that where they can affect us is in the logistics flow to these things. And so they have learned, as we have, and they have moved the fight, in many cases back, to the rear area. And there are areas where they can do that pretty effectively, and there are areas where we find it difficult to maintain constant guard -- inside cities and the like.

And so it is -- they have gotten more effective in using IEDs. You may or may not recall, but I mean, they -- we get about -- through various tactics, techniques and procedures, we find about 50 percent, maybe more, of the IEDs before they ever go off. And we used a lot of tactics before that were very effective -- driving convoys fast through the areas. You know, some might go off, and they'd go off behind you. We've used technology to try and eliminate their capability to remotely control these things. And that's been effective, but it's effective for a short time. The enemy is very smart and thinking. It is a thinking enemy. So he changes his tactics, and he becomes more effective. I mean, he learns about leads, you know; he learns you don't try to blow the bomb up when the truck's next to it. You blow it up two or three truck lengths ahead of it, and he's becoming more effective.

Q Can you say one of the reasons you're here is to talk about IEDs?

GEN. SMITH: I'm going to get a briefing from the IED task force -- Joint IED Task Force today that we've been working with, to try and find out where we are with the technology piece. We've had a number of technologies that we've tried out in the theater, some more successful than others, but no silver bullet. I don't know that we'll ever find a silver bullet to this. This is a very simple technology, but it is also very adaptive technology. They may use doorbells today to blow these things up. They may use remote controls from toys tomorrow. And as we adapt, they adapt. And we have been hoping that our technology would be more effective than it has been.

Q General?

Q General, do you think the insurgency is growing, actually?

GEN. SMITH: I'm sorry?

Q There are some people who are saying this insurgency is growing instead of diminishing --

GEN. SMITH: Well, let's -- I don't know how you characterize the insurgency as growing or not growing. What we have been saying for a long, long time is that we had expected -- and I mean, we've been saying this for six to eight months now -- that we have expected violence to increase as it -- as we get closer and closer to the elections. We have never, ever said anything different from that, and it is. Now certainly during Ramadan it increased. It is now back, as far as the number of events, to pre-Ramadan levels. And you know, as they build a capability, they will try and have greater impact as we get closer to the election. So I don't necessarily characterize that as the insurgency growing. I do characterize it as an increase in violent activity.

Q General, to what extent --

STAFF: Time for a couple more, folks. One or two more, folks. One or two more.

Q A couple --

Q To what extent is -- to what extent is the U.S. military now going to get involved in drug eradication or interdiction in Afghanistan?

GEN. SMITH: We would -- and a lot of this is under discussion as we speak, so don't take what I say as policy. It is being discussed at the highest levels.

We would prefer not to be -- we, the Central Command would prefer not to be in the eradication business. That is -- and it goes back to the original statement on who's responsible for the counternarcotics piece in here. First of all, it is the government of Afghanistan. They've got the lead. The coalition lead is the U. K., and the U.S. government lead is the DEA. And those are the folks that we believe -- and plus international narcotics and law enforcement out of the Department of State -- that should be involved in the eradication program, and then we'd provide whatever support they need for them to be able to go do their job.

Clearly we can help most, we think, in the interdiction area. We have assets that can help. And we can help in the intelligence area as far as locating and trying to define the poppy fields, some of the drug labs, and some of those other areas. So again, we don't want to be in a lead role on this, but we have an awful lot of assets over there that can provide support to other organizations that will go out and do this. CFC-Alpha under -- Combined Forces Command Afghanistan under General Barno would be the CENTCOM lead for this in providing that support.

Q But given the potential threat from the drug trade to the underpinnings of the government itself, will it be necessary that the U.S. military get more directly involved, not the lead, but --

GEN. SMITH: No, that's a good question. And I think all of us -- you know, if we had had this conversation a year ago, there would have been some definite pushback from us in the uniformed military and Central Command on whether this is a mission for the military, mainly because we have spent a lot of capital in trying to build relationships with the people in there and now this has potential for us to do things that wouldn't be popular for some of the areas we're operating in. But it is absolutely clear to us, as it is to you, that everything that we've done in Afghanistan would be for nought if we allowed the narcotraffickers and everybody else to take over. And so it is clear that we have a role to play, and it will be up to the secretary and actually National Security Council to determine the role that we would play in that. Right now we are working to provide as much support as we can with the assets that we have in theater.

MR. WHITMAN: Last question.

Q General?

GEN. SMITH: Yes, sir.

Q You spoke at the beginning about the morale of American forces. You've described the enemy as smart, clearly resourceful, adjusting all the time. What's your assessment of how close you are, if you are close at all, to breaking the spirit, breaking the will of the enemy? Because that's the key historically in insurgency.

GEN. SMITH: Well, I think if you use Afghanistan as an example, I think clearly the election itself, the success of the election had a very, very significant impact on the Taliban. And as you know, they made some threats against the inauguration as well that they weren't able to follow through on. And so we see -- again, you know, it's always hard to really understand exactly what's going on in the enemy camp, but we are confident that we're seeing many indications that the Taliban have -- their morale is down, we're seeing a lot of them lay down their arms, taking positive steps in consideration for the reconciliation.

If we can get through the election, that's not going to be a silver bullet in itself, but I think that will have a significant impact on the insurgents. And they're going to have to take a look at themselves and see what it is they really want for their organizations, their families, their tribes in Iraq in the future. And if they don't participate, it's going to be pretty bleak. And, you know, there are many, many talented former Ba'athist folks that could play leadership roles within the Iraqi government, and it seems much smarter to us, and it seems much smarter to the moderate Sunni that they take that path instead of the one they're taking.

Right now we believe it is a small percentage of the Sunni population that is involved in these extremist activities. And I'd remind again that for the most part it's Sunnis that they're killing. And so, you know, that's a losing proposition, in our opinion. And I think if we can get through the elections and the aftermath of that, that we will have more and more moderates that will be prepared and willing to take a lead, and hopefully that will help destroy the spirit, if you will, of the insurgency. But it's not going to be a silver bullet. It is going to have to be a gradual thing that they're going to have to find light at the end of the tunnel. And Prime Minister Allawi clearly is -- understands that part of what he has to do is give them some hope and move down the road of reconciliation with the former regime and the Ba'athists.

MR. WHITMAN: Sir, we appreciate your time.

GEN. SMITH: Great. Thanks very much.

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